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# Heroinisme

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The image features a vibrant green background with several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes. A large, dark green shape on the right side contains the word "Intro" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The overall composition is modern and minimalist.

**Intro**

## We don't need another hero, do we?

Researching heroism from a cultural perspective

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### **Abstract:**

This article addresses different aspects of heroes and heroism and it offers an introductory analysis of approaches to heroism, which may be relevant for the articles in this issue of *Academic Quarter*. These approaches are all from a culturally theoretical perspective. They encompass a discussion of an ontological need for heroes. The sections of the article are also about mythological heroism, the hero's quest as a narrative principle, heroes as historical agents and modern heroism. The latter is also of a reflexive and critical nature and under the heading of "the besieged hero", it includes a discussion of the problematic figure of the superhero as found in blockbuster movies.

**Keywords:** heroism, mythological hero, superheroes, reflexive heroism, besieged heroism.

As the first article in this issue of *Academic Quarter* about heroism we give an analysis of forms of heroism, historical and contemporary. The analysis contains shifting attitudes through time to heroes and heroism.

To kick off we consult popular culture of the 1980s as a period that has resurfaced in the landscape of contemporary culture. From the echo of the 1980s we hear the voice of pop icon Tina Turner singing, "We don't need another hero." These words were part of the theme score of the post-apocalyptic action movie *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (Miller 1985). In the movie the actor Mel Gibson plays the lead role of "Mad" Max Rockatansky, who does his best to help and keep safe the undefended citizens of a scattered society. However, Mel Gibson's take on the hero character was arguably that of an anti-hero. The song may refer to the notion that we don't need heroes, because heroes stir up trouble and might not guarantee any state of equilibrium in the society the hero is part of. As demonstrated in the blockbuster movie franchise *Lethal Weapon* Mel Gibson contributed to this notion of an anti-hero as war veteran and police officer Martin Riggs (Warner Bros. Pictures 1987-1998). The hero is flawed or conflicted in regard to the role of being both protector and protagonist. And yet the hero still manages to protect and serve his community and partner.

Two decades later movie Director Christopher Nolan made hard-working police commissioner Jim Gordon voice the need of a hero, whom the shattered society does not need but deserves (*The Dark Knight*, 2008). In the movie *The Dark Knight*, commissioner Gordon's last act is to disavow the protagonist and friend that helped to secure a significant measure of peace and order in the dark and disturbed fictional city of Gotham. But Batman keeps coming back, alongside a range of heroes and superheroes, who defend ordinary people against villains, supernatural beings and intergalactic antagonists, and in some cases even the ordinary people themselves. Why is there a need to have heroes and continued production of narratives about heroes? This is a central theme and research question of this article. In this article we explore the concept of the hero and heroism as cultural phenomena and their historically changing shapes, representations. We also address narratives about heroes and heroism that are relevant to our current time. It is part of the argument of this article that the symbolic representation of this he-

roic protagonist changes over time. In war time, we need heroic protagonists that defend our way of life. In peace time, we need heroic protagonists to ensure some measure of fairness, right and order. And in our own lives we need protagonists to inspire us in how to lead a good life, even up until the end.

### **The culture of heroes and heroism?**

As a point of departure for this article we adopt the position proposed by Jela Žižek (2016). Heroes and heroism are a cultural phenomenon that are both the object of admiration and of ambivalence. We know that heroism is an absolute good. Our myths and current media news stories tell us so. We need heroes and heroism as an ontological category that makes us believe in the direction that our lives are taking us and gives us hope for the future. But at the same time heroism is foolish. In the fictional universe, super/heroes act out of a principle of selflessness and often encounter impossible situations and dangers. The number of casualties in the movie universe of heroes demonstrates that you need certain unique skills in order to cope with life. Take the example of the Marvel Cinematic Universe blockbuster *Infinity War* (Marvel Studios 2018), in which the antagonist Thanos with godlike powers kills trillions of human beings with a snap of his fingers. In everyday life the dangers of 'stepping up' are more likely to merit the obituary section of press media. For Žižek, superheroism is foolish, or more precisely the genre is stupid. Because we know, as an audience, and as individuals, that the superpowers involved are fake (regardless of what the engineering sciences envision). But nevertheless, Žižek concludes, the belief in heroes and heroism are something we need. The act of heroism and the individual hero is needed to inspire but also to warn us of an unjust society. It is important to 'step up' and confront matters of conflict or things that are not fair and just. To enter into conflicts is important, even though it may very well implicate the individual and even endanger ourselves. This is what the audience of movies, fiction and press news knows: Happy endings are only certain in the fictional universe of (super)hero narratives. If we take one step back and contemplate the notion of the hero/heroism it is possible to place heroes and heroism as an integral part of diverse kinds of narratives. This narratological aspect of heroes, can be ascertained from the tendency of literary narratology to use the

terms hero and protagonist interchangeably (Abrams 1971, 128; Cuddon 2014, 329, 565). In stories and in news reports audiences as ordinary people look for the goodies and the baddies, and in some cases even the agents in between.

The above-mentioned narratological fusion of the terms protagonist and hero is elaborated systematically with regard to genres and their historical development by Frye (1957/1973). In his system and hierarchy of the tragedy genre, the hero/protagonist is marginalized or expelled from society. In mythic tragedy, the hero is a god such as Hercules or Christ, and in high mimetic tragedy, the hero is a noble human such as Othello, whereas in low mimetic or domestic tragedy, the hero or protagonist is a human who suffers a tragic fate, as Tess of the d'Urbervilles or Little Nell.

At the bottom of Frye's hierarchy, there is the tragic, ironic mode with a protagonist or hero, who fails such as Job or the hero of Kafka's *Trial*. (Frye 1957/1973, 35-43). In comedy, the hero is integrated in society. With regard to the concepts of the reflexive modern hero and the besieged hero, which will be discussed later in this article, Frye's ironic mode, both in tragedy and comedy, is pertinent. In both modes, the hero is challenged. In the tragic mode, the hero may suffer persecution from a society that is ethically and ideologically wrong, and in the comic mode, the hero is ethically problematic himself and partially outside society, as Sherlock Holmes. (Frye 1957/1973, 45-49).

The article argues that an understanding of heroes and heroism needs to address different stages in cultural transformations: The mythological, the modern, the reflexive modern and the besieged modern. In this article this distinction is inspired by the works of current sociologists who all address the "precarious" or "volatile" nature of our global society and the interactions in the "global village" and the cultural identities we need to consider (Beck 1997, Giddens 2000, Bauman 2007, Žižek 2000, 2008, 2011). To understand what fuels, necessitates or makes these transformations possible is a research question or a set of questions that this article in itself is unable to answer. In different disciplines (e.g. history, anthropology, sociology, psychology) the transformation from one "era" or paradigm is enacted or invoked on the grounds of different epistemic elements (e.g. conflicts, revolutions in research, or social/natural catastrophes). This is also why these cultural transformations



of *the hero* and the principle of *heroism* may overlap and even co-exist in so far as historical aspects are reflected in newer transformations. Carlyle's categorizations of heroes (Carlyle 1840) consisted of:

- The Hero as Divinity with Odin as a case
- The Hero as Prophet with Muhammad as a case
- The Hero as Poet with Shakespeare as a case
- The Hero as Priest with Luther as a case
- The Hero as Man of Letters with Rousseau as a case
- The Hero as King with Napoleon and Modern Revolutionism as cases

A hero figure could be read as mythological heroism, modern heroism as well as reflective heroism simultaneously. This explanation of transformation may be criticized for being both ethnocentric, academic, and not being aware of the diversity and complexity of cultures around the world. However, this framework of understanding hero(es) and heroism can be defended to merit as an interpretation helpful in the endeavor of explaining, how and why heroes and heroism are relevant subjects of scholarly research. Or, why heroes persist and endure, even though we as individuals may be reluctant to participate in society as heroes.

The following analysis of the dimensions and differences connected to notions of heroes and heroism is inspired by the aforementioned sources of insights into the changing conditions and paradigms for cultural production of representations and notions of our subject. This framework may be criticized for being too general and excluding particular cases of unique instances relevant to the subject. However, the point of the framework is to propose a possible way of distinguishing between overall differences.

### **Mythological heroes and heroism**

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in 1949, has been influential despite its criticism (Elwood 1999) of being eclectic and inaccurate in its use of source material, and criticism of being gender specific in its focus on masculinity (Murdock, 1990; Frankel 2010). Campbell's work is placed precariously between folklore, with focus on myth, and narratology, and it has strong links to Jungian archetype theory (Jung 1968), and also the

Freudian psychoanalytical couch is quoted by Campbell as a source (Campbell 1949/1975, 14). Campbell also includes "the rituals of primitive tribes and great civilizations of the past" (18) as his empirical material. Campbell's construction of the hero rests on what he calls a monomyth, which is ahistorical and acultural in the sense that it applies to all historical periods and all cultures. This is possible, he claims (Campbell 1949/1975, 13-20; Hansen, 2009) because the myth is based on the human mind itself, and the arguments for this are placed in psychology and psychoanalysis as well as in comparative mythology.

The all-inclusive nature of Campbell's take on the hero is apparent from the list of mythic heroes. Among many others, they are Theseus, Ulysses, Prometheus, Jason, Buddha, Moses, Jonah, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Osiris, the Irish Finn MacCool and Cuchulainn, Rip van Winkle, the Eskimo Raven, Jack the Giant Killer, and Charlemagne. These hero figures all partake in the same quest pattern of the monomyth. The narrative structure of this monomyth is an elaboration of its nucleus, separation – initiation – return, and it is circular: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." (Campbell 1949/1975, 31). The heroic quest pattern contains the same number of steps; however, the specific functions or steps can be attributed to different agents. For instance in the step of The Whale's Belly, in which the hero is swallowed by a huge monster, there may be Jonah swallowed by a whale, the Eskimo trickster-hero Raven, Finn MacCool swallowed by a Celtic *peist*, Little Riding Hood by a wolf, and in a Zulu myth the swallowing monster is an elephant.

In the last chapter of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, "The Hero Today" Campbell quotes Nietzsche who in turn argues that "Dead are all the gods", and because of "the democratic ideal of the self-determining individual, the invention of the power driven machine, and the development of the scientific method of research" the dream-web of myth has fallen away (327). The hero figure of the monomyth may have fallen away as an ontological possibility; but it lives forcefully on in fiction and mass media. The narrative structure of Campbell's monomythical hero and its tropes have subse-

quently been translated by Christopher Vogler (1992/1999) into Hollywood blockbuster film narratives. Furthermore, Hollywood employed the hero quest as a narrative structure even before Vogler's manual for screenwriters, *The Writer's Journey. Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (1992/1999). For instance, in Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940), based on the Italian children's book from 1881, the eponymous character is swallowed by the giant whale Monster, and he finds his Geppetto living in its belly. Vogler codifies Campbell's monomyth as a screenwriting tool. His book contains a worksheet to help the scriptwriter along (303). Vogler stresses that this structure is more than a "dictatorial mandate" and not "formulaic" (xv, xiii), and in his inspirational catalogue of heroes, he stresses that a hero is more than a warrior. He suggests the hero could be "pacifist, mother, pilgrim, fool, wanderer, hermit, inventor, nurse, savior, artist, lunatic, lover, clown, king, victim, slave, worker, rebel, adventurer, tragic failure, coward, saint monster" (xviii). The hero quest structure is particularly prevalent in the fantasy genre (Christensen 2011), but Vogler's examples span many film genres with the titles *Titanic* (1997), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *The Full Monty* (1997), as well as the *Star Wars* films, and many more.

Campbell's structure of a hero's quest lives on from its place as a monomyth in many mythologies, and religions and in folklore. They may have lost their primary ontological functions, but as Vogler's work illustrates they live on at a narrative level in popular entertainment.

### **Heroism as a historical agent**

Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841/2013) portrayed great men or heroes and their roles in history. Carlyle's views were to some extent shared by Friedrich Hegel and Max Weber, whereas e.g. Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer adapted a wider scope to the forces forming history.

In the chapter "The Hero as King", as a system of government Carlyle raises the ideal of the ablest man as leader, which he sees as a welcome alternative to parliamentary democracy: "Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise *him* to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him: you have a perfect government for that country: no ballot-box, parliamentary eloquence, voting,

constitution-building or other machinery whatsoever can improve it a whit." (Carlyle 1840, 182) Yet, Carlyle is quick to point out that this is only an ideal that cannot be reached: "Alas, we know very well that Ideals can never be completely embodied in practice." (182) On the contrary, Carlyle elevates the regicide Oliver Cromwell to a great man of history (197, 195). Napoleon, too, is one of Carlyle's heroes as king, though he finds Cromwell greater (218). Carlyle's heroes do not only belong within the political realm. His heroes are also divinity, prophets, poets, priests, men of letters, and it is these heroes, who shape history:

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these. (Carlyle 1840, 1-2)

Hegel shared Carlyle's admiration for Napoleon. In a letter he wrote: "I saw the Emperor—this world-soul [Weltseele]—riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it<sup>fi</sup>." (Hegel 1970, 119) In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel subscribes to the idea of individual causing history to progress: "At the summit of all actions, including world-historical actions, stand individuals. Each of these individuals is a subjectivity who realizes what is substantive. He is a living embodiment of the substantive deed of the world-spirit, and is, therefore, directly identical with this deed." (Hegel 1820/2001, 268) It can be argued, that some cultural consequences of the hero as a historical agent can be viewed critically. As a symbol the superhero may be interpreted in ways that either enforce or challenge society. In the superhero universes hope is a cultural consequence, but at the same time the actions of the

superhero are also destructive. The Avengers take part in reducing New York City to a war zone (2012), and Superman violates his vow not to kill *Man of Steel* (2013). In *Superman: Red Son* (2003) the superhero enforces a communist society. Cultural consequences are a matter of interpretation.

In contrast, Karl Marx did not see history being formed by heroic individuals. In the Marxist theory of historical materialism, the historical agent was the class struggle. In the introduction to Friedrich Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1892), historical materialism designates "that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another." In 1896 Herbert Spencer shared this view of history in the way that he inscribed great men in it, so that they themselves were products of history: "You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown. ... Before he can remake his society, his society must make him." (Spencer 1896, 31)

### Modern heroes and heroism

Until this point of the article, heroism and the heroic agent has been presented both as myth and as historical agent, and also as a popular narrative device in film making, e.g. through Vogler's work on film manuscripts, as argued. The modernization of heroism can both be explained by modern media and popular culture, or in effect through the capitalization of cultural content (Arnaudo 2013, Bahlmann 2016). We need heroes to keep the cultural production of value going. In the 1970s, Umberto Eco presents his semiotic analysis of *The Myth of Superman* (Eco 1972/1984). As a case Eco demonstrates a basic formula of how heroism is portrayed and represented following the lines of what has already been touched upon in this article.

One of Eco's points is that the "hunger" for heroism in entertaining narratives is a hunger for redundancy. In a society of increasing complexity, be it objective or perceived, the need for steadiness or an ontological base becomes important. But Eco does not diagnose the audience for (super)heroism as neither passive nor bewitched.

This conclusion is supported by Jela Žižek's reading of comic book superheroes. As Žižek writes: "The true lie resides precisely in the attempt to throw off the disguise and show a realist story." (Žižek 2016, 869) In Žižek's interpretation, the introduction of personal development of the hero characters and delving into the personal conflicts of the heroes is a way to cloud the cultural value of heroes. And in effect to counter the theme "we don't need another hero". As she notes: "This last stance is the only ethical one, more ethical than superheroes themselves are: it advocates complete fidelity to the genre regardless of its many flaws." (Žižek 2016, 873). What both Eco and Žižek point to in relation to understanding modern hero/ism is the balance of redundancy and complexity. The premise is that (super)heroes are human with flaws and personal conflicts. They are not to be identified with because they have the mythological awe and powers beyond human capabilities. The authority by strength is something that modernization has pointed out as something to be critical of.

There is one element of modern hero/ism that neither Eco nor Žižek directly deal with. This element is the commodification of heroes. Modern heroism still refers to the principles of sociological thoughts on heroism. But the modern hero enters into an ongoing reproductive circulation of book and newspaper pages, radio broadcasts and movie and TV-screen appearances. Since the 1940s, it is evident that superheroes, understood as defenders of justice and a liberal way of life, overall have been a profitable and expanding business. Producing narratives (plus toys and merchandizes) of superheroes with godlike or extraordinary powers and abilities proved to have both an ideological and economical value. Even news stories reporting on the extraordinary acts of ordinary people turn the hero into a commodity. In this sense, the turn to modern hero/ism represents the creation of contemporary fictional characters situated in current societies and not in any mythological time. An example of this is presented in the MCU *Endgame* when the 'smart' Hulk takes a selfie with some children (Marvel Studios 2019). Even though the super/hero is 'so super' he is human enough (or 'reachable') enough to entertain or the fans.

### Reflexive modern heroism and the besieged hero

If we return to the final movie instalments of the Avenger franchise (*Infinity War* 2018, *Endgame* 2019), concluding the Marvel Cinematic Universe that started with the movie *Iron Man* (2008), the complete story arc tells a tale of a happy ending. Order is restored. Tears are being shed, because order demanded sacrifices. Honor is acknowledged and celebrated. Even though the fictive world of the MCU is not the same, closure has been somehow achieved. One lesson learned, or rather repeated, is that no order can be accomplished without victims and losses. And that the loss of a superhero leaves a mark on all of us. How to move on from that experience?

Reflexive modern heroism is not defined by the loss of the super/hero and the following grief and mourning by neither the public nor the fellow superheroes, their family and friends. The experience that the super/hero can die still resonates in the notion of modern heroism. Reflexive modern heroism is not defined by any subjectivization or psychological profiling of the super/heroes. Learning about the thoughts and personal life of the super/hero is in itself not reflexivity. The term "the reflexive modern" is borrowed from sociology (Beck 1997, Bauman 2007, Žižek 2011) and it intends to describe notions of "serious doubt" accompanied by an experience that both revitalizes and revises the labour of Sisyphus from Greek mythology. In sociology the term "reflexivity" means both the ability to tap into the increased global flow of information and based on that create knowledge relevant to our individual lives, thus making us able to make informed decisions and create a coherent and hopefully fair society (Giddens 2000). However, reflexivity also means something darker. Reflexive modern thought points to the fact that our actions based on knowledge and both careful and rash considerations become part of the exact threat or problem that calls for the help or intervention of both super/heroes and the principle of heroism. One sign of reflexive modern heroism is doing something by doing less, or even nothing. Because, does it really matter?

In much of his work, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes and talks about the need for a collective moral authority (e.g. Žižek 2000, 2001, 2008). This authority is established by doing something, instead of simply doing nothing, and not elapsing to do nothing. At the same time Žižek points to the many difficulties of establishing such an authority without conforming to specific ideologies and the

expectable actions. For Žižek, the super/hero cannot ensure collective moral authority, not even by example. For Žižek the super/hero does not represent an agent as tool for establishing order and authority, but instead represents the problem or the phenomenon that needs to be combatted. This means that when super/heroes appear, the problem we know that we have to deal with is actualized, and when the (super)heroes appear in either work clothes or colourful outfits, their actions call to us and include us in the problem. Collective moral authority cannot be achieved by the super/heroic act in itself, not even by a group of superheroes. The following example illustrates elements of what reflexive modern super/heroism entails. In Sam Raimi's movie *Spider-Man 2* (2004), citizens of New York stand up for the masked teenage superhero (the student and newspaper photographer Peter Parker) after he has successfully stopped a runaway train. The exhausted Spider-Man has collapsed and his foe, the totemic Doctor Otto Octavius, demands the body of Spider-Man handed over. But the citizens in the tram stand up and tell Doc Ock: *"If you wanna get to him you're gonna have to get through me. And me!"* (Raimi 2004) The one citizen first to voice this stand against the villain is a big man, a worker, and he is quickly followed by the other people in the train. But what is interesting in relation to a reflexive modern take on super/heroism is that the big guy does not seem confident. Though he is big (for a human) and that his size may be the reason for him to be the first to confront the super villain, most probably the worker has realized that the collective strength of all the other passengers combined will not be enough to exercise collective moral authority: Leave the kid alone! In that exact moment the protected becomes the protector but with the knowledge that the group is not able to mobilize the necessary strength to be successful.

If it is possible to talk about or to positively identify a reflexive modern take on super/heroism, it may be traced or spotted in situations like this one. Behind the worker's hesitation is the reflection or assessment that it is morally right to stand up, but is it really possible? The notion of doubt is not new to super/heroism in its many forms throughout history, maybe excluding the mythical hero. Reflexivity becomes apparent in moments of hesitation, moments of doubts, and even despair. In a more humorous fashion this is presented in the Disney Pixar animated movies *The In-*



*credibles* 1 and 2 (Bird 2004, 2018) with the notable difference that the attempt (or rather the success) to create collective moral authority comes from the family and not any group of citizens in a train. In the case of Spider-Man, the citizens get their faith, their *communitas* or collective ethos, rewarded. Spider-Man surrenders and in effect saves the day.

Reflexive heroism is a tough choice, echoing feelings of disbelief and the interdependent and interchangeable roles of protector and protected. This in itself is not a new insight into the study of super/ heroes in popular and everyday culture. But if we turn to the sociological thought of both Zygmunt Bauman and Slavoj Žižek another aspect appears (Bauman 2007, Žižek 2011): The lack of closure and cathartic release. This sensation or awareness (of being a super/ hero) might be described with the notion of being “besieged” (Bauman 2007). It points to a state of cultural awareness and self-awareness in which the very cause that the super/hero(in)es stand up to confront is insecure, or uncertain. In this article it will be a considerable detour to outline in detail the relation between reflexive modernity and postmodernism, but one point can be made. In postmodernism, the “Grand Narratives” were claimed insufficient to guarantee a fixed relation between concrete signs and any “grand order” or meaningfulness. This split was considered to many a liberation from older ideologies, and the split was explored with a kind of playfulness and hope for the formulation of new meanings. An early example of this would be the camp 1960s version of *Batman* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television), to some extent the 2010s cartoon tv-series *Teen Titans Go* (Warner Bros. Animation, DC Entertainment), and maybe the more current *Deadpool* franchise (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox). In reflexive modernity, this split persists, but the exploration of it is no longer playful. It is to some degree rather fearsome, and the super/hero is confronted with meaninglessness (Žižek 2008, 2011). As mentioned earlier doubt in itself is not something new for the super/hero, but for the besieged super/hero the doubt cannot be resolved or reduced because the action of the super/hero is part of the problem the super/hero is confronting and combating. The superheroine Jessica Jones could be one example of a besieged super/hero (Marvel Comics, Netflix). She is extremely conscious of her flaws and limits and at the same time doubtful of the value of her possible efforts. This ‘double doubt’, paves the way for

a reversal of sympathy (are hero/in/es really helpful), guilt (what about those antagonists I vanquish), alienation (do I really belong) and disillusion (does my effort really matter)? This statement or claim is formulated as a question as it deserves further analysis and conceptual development (e.g. discussing the relationship between reflexive besieged heroism and Frye's ironic heroism mentioned earlier).

### Conclusion

What does it take to be a super/hero? Is it possible to pinpoint one single formula for heroism in our times? As we have demonstrated, heroes have persisted throughout the course of time in various but overlapping forms and transformations. We have argued that the notion and conditions of heroism have changed. The concept of the hero has been relocated from religion and myths to blockbuster film franchises, and heroes are no longer exclusively seen as historical agents. Also, the blockbuster superhero universe has been beset by hesitation and doubts about the societal status of heroes. The trope of the always male hero is correspondingly challenged. Our research question: "Why this need not to have heroes, while still producing narratives about heroes?", has provided an answer in itself. The need for heroes is a need for narratives about heroes and not just "another hero", narratives which no longer contain the ontological answers of the heroes of myth and history.

To conclude, the initial words sung by Tina Turner, "we don't need another hero", was the voice of the public, the citizens, who suffer but still hope. What we may factor in or acknowledge in relation to a besieged heroism is, that now the words are voiced by the heroes themselves: Do we need us? This question is answered by popular culture and the cultural industry with a promise of new productions, new representations. And not to forget an ever-growing fan base that admire and mimic the hero(in)es of our time.

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### Note

- [i] *den Kaiser—diese Weltseele—sah ich durch die Stadt zum Rekognoszieren hinausreiten; es ist in der Tat eine wunderbare Empfindung, ein solches Individuum zu sehen, das hier auf einen Punkt konzentriert, auf einem Pferd sitzend, über die Welt übergreift und sie beherrscht*. Hegel, letter of 13 October 1806 to F. I. Niethammer, no. 74 (p. 119) (Hegel 1970).

Populærkultur

æstetik

&

Popular culture

aesthetics

## Fans feeling a disturbance in the Force

*Star Wars* and the power of paratexts

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### Abstract

Ever since Disney acquired Lucasfilm in 2012, the *Star Wars* franchise has been widely praised for its updated take on and inclusion of diversity (extending in particular to women), having moved away from its image as purely a boys' club to include everyone. While this may seem true at first glance if we regard the blockbuster films of the *Star Wars* franchise, such a sentiment proves to be more problematic when we consider the merchandise accompanying the films. This article starts by reading the gender diversity of the *Star Wars* franchise as "plastic representation" (Warner 2017), branching out to include *Star Wars* merchandise as paratexts (Genette 1997, Gray 2010, Scott, 2017). Reading *Star Wars* toys, action figures and play sets as culturally significant objects and markers of fan identity (Geraghtly 2014), I argue that these paratexts serve to bolster gendered franchising and to work as "fanagement" (Hills 2010) to promote certain types of fan engagement in *Star Wars*, while at the same time policing others.

*Keywords* *Star Wars*, paratexts, gender, fandom, franchise, merchandise

### **Star Wars is for everyone! Or is it?**

*Star Wars* has recently seen a surge of new female leads and heroes: Jyn Erso in *Rogue One* (2016), and Rey in *The Force Awakens* (2015) and *The Last Jedi* (2017). These characters have been hailed as new and feminine ways of expressing heroism within the *Star Wars* franchise; and the films have been championed as feminist, multicultural and progressive. So far, Disney's strategy of appealing to a wider spread of audience demographics has certainly paid off at the box office. The diversity in Disney's *Star Wars* has led commentators and critics to proclaim that "Star Wars is for everyone" (Roberts 2015); while others point to a shift taking place within the franchise, which "has historically been viewed as a 'boy's club' (and remains so, in many ways)" (Proctor 2016, n.p.). While this may be true if we focus purely on the *Star Wars* films, such an approach is too narrow in terms of what *Star Wars* is: it is the "most voluminous paratextual entourage in entertainment history" (Gray 2010, p. 177). From its earliest days, the story of *Star Wars* existed well beyond the films, in novels, comics, TV shows, digital games and of course toys, expanding into an international franchise with decades of cultural history and multi-billion-dollar merchandising. Due to this strategy of having a core narrative in the films and relying on a multitude of surrounding media paratexts to supplement this core narrative, the diversity and femininity of *Star Wars* are anchored in all of these many texts – not just the films. In this article I will examine how this much-hailed and newfound feminism of *Stars Wars* is configured; and what we may be able to discover if we shift our focus to some of the many merchandise paratexts surrounding these films.

### **Off-screen studies: reading merchandise as paratexts**

Film-related merchandise is a very lucrative part of film business, and five of the top ten licensors are entertainment companies under Disney, earning a total of 53 billion dollars in merchandise sales (Afusso & Santo, 2018, n.p.). The acquisition of *Star Wars* in 2012 cemented Disney's status at the absolute leader of licensed merchandise sales. In addition to the blockbuster successes of the *Star Wars* films themselves, George Lucas famously made the decision to forego his salary for the films in exchange for retaining the licensing rights to the merchandise (amongst other things). This is a large

part of the reason why Disney paid 4.6 billion dollars in 2012 for the intellectual property rights to *Star Wars*.

In analysing the importance of merchandise, Jonathan Gray has argued that “we need an ‘off-screen studies’ to make sense of the wealth of other entities that saturate the media, and that construct film and television” (Gray 2010, p. 4). Within film and media studies, merchandise is traditionally framed as an industrial imperative to widen revenue streams thanks to the fact that toys can “extend the ‘shelf life’” of a particular film (Wyatt, 1994, p. 148). Franchise films occur at certain intervals, with merchandise providing links between them to keep audiences engaged between instalments. But fan studies offer a different reading of merchandise in the light of fan identities, with fandom being closely related to the wider shifts within “consumer culture, such as the increase in consumption-based social and communal identities” (Hills 2002, p. 28). Along this line of thinking, Lincoln Geraghtly views merchandise as material culture, carrying both a social history and a deeply personal history – for instance for adult fan collectors, for whom *Star Wars* merchandise functions as a form of cultural capital and an engrained part of their self-identity: “Star Wars toy collecting is about constructing an identity as a fan and creating new meanings from a pre-established universe” (Geraghtly 2014, p. 121).

The first step towards a wider consideration of *Star Wars* merchandise is to acknowledge the prominent position of media *paratexts* as opposed to the centrality of specific *texts*. As stated in the original introduction by Gerard Genette in *Paratexts. Thresholds of interpretation* (1997), paratexts create a zone not only of transmission “but also of *transaction*” (p. 2), setting up expectations and shaping meaning in anticipation of the main text itself. Adapting Genette’s work for media culture, Jonathan Gray’s work on media paratexts (2010) considers branded merchandise as paratextual surroundings around the main text of the film. Merchandise is often part of the promotional material for franchise films, with products being available to consumers many weeks before the film itself premieres and often serving as a vehicle to guide customers about what to expect when the film finally opens. Gray argues that toys “have never merely been ‘secondary’ spinoffs or coincidental: they have played a vital role in, and thus have become a vital part of, the primary text and its unrivalled success” (Gray, 2010, p. 183). Mer-



chandise such as action figures have the ability to not only continue the story from a film, but also “strengthen or weaken established meanings” (ibid., p. 178). They can function as both *in medias res* paratexts, keeping us connected to the franchise in-between sequels, and as *entryway paratexts*, serving as our primary way into the franchise (see also Waade & Toft-Nielsen, 2015). Franchise paratexts such as toys and action figures cannot be divided easily into either category, as they occupy both simultaneously. For some fans, toys serve as paratextual clues into the not-yet available main text of the upcoming film; while for other fans they are inevitably situated in and draw upon decades of paratextual meanings and understandings of *Star Wars*. Toys thus exemplify the slippages between paratext, intertext and text in reading and understanding a franchise (Gray 2010, pp. 117-118). Suzanne Scott argues that the fact that modern media paratexts “are so frequently rooted within marketing and merchandizing frameworks demands that we confront their overwhelmingly conservative and hegemonic functionality” (Scott 2017, p. 139). Toys and merchandise are paratextual agents that serve gatekeeping functions, allowing certain types of fan engagement and deterring others; and as such, they become sites of struggle between the owners of a franchise and particular consumers/fans of that franchise.

### **‘I contain women, so I must be feminist’: plastic representation in and around *Star Wars***

Reading through the various promotional paratexts that are produced in anticipation of media texts that are not yet available, we automatically engage in “speculative consumption”: setting up anticipations and creating ideas of “what pleasures any one text will provide, what information it will offer, what ‘effect’ it will have on us and so forth” (Gray 2010, p. 24). The many paratexts that flourished prior to *The Last Jedi* (2017) fed into fans’ speculative consumption, a large part of which centred around the continuation of the female lead of Rey first introduced in *The Force Awakens* (2015) as well as several new female characters in the *Star Wars* mythos, one being Rose Tico (Kelly Marie Tran), the first woman of colour to portray a leading character in a *Star Wars* film. While viewer expectations fuelled by the promotional material were massive prior to the film’s premiere, the disappointment afterwards was evident:

“The movie diminishes the role of its own female lead, mishandles its characters of color, and gives women no meaningful impact on the final story. [...]. *The Last Jedi* doesn’t let women drive their own stories. It’s only wearing a sign that says, ‘I contain women, so I must be feminist’” (Queen 2018, n.p.). In other words: the parts are all there, but the execution is lacking. This very precisely reflects Kristen J. Warner’s sentiment that in an age in which diversity matters, “the degree of diversity became synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than the dimensionality of those performances” (Warner 2017, n.p.). Both female characters and persons of colour in *The Last Jedi* function as what Kristen J. Warner calls “plastic representation”:

a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny [...]. Plastic representation uses the wonder that comes from seeing characters on screen who serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more (ibid., n.p.)

Plastic representation ticks all the boxes of diverse representation, allowing the franchise to sidestep any real work of creating a nuanced and empowering representation, while still being able to claim visible but superficial diversity. In the April of the year that *The Last Jedi* premiered, Disney announced its first female-targeted instalment within the franchise: *Star Wars: Forces of Destiny*, a YouTube series and toy line which featured *Star Wars*’ most famous female characters. While being marketed as gender neutral ‘Adventure Figures’, they are extremely doll-like, with their brushable hair, slender limbs, large eyes and calm expressions more than hinting how “the use of the ‘Adventure Figure’ label seems first and foremost a branding strategy aimed at feminist audiences” (Bruin-Molé 2018, n.p.).



Figure 1. *Star Wars: Forces of Destiny* cast of female heroine characters. Picture from initial press release.

*The way in which* the franchise appeals to girl and women fans is just as important as whether it does this at all. *Forces of Destiny* seems to be a direct response to the growing demands for more inclusion of female fans in the *Star Wars* franchise. In her insightful analysis, Megen de Bruin-Molé (2018) points out that the *Forces of Destiny* series was a low-risk investment by Disney, freely distributed on YouTube (rather than Disney XD, where *Star Wars: Rebels* and part of *LEGO Star Wars* aired). The episodes often included cute and cuddly companions, underscoring the fact that it ultimately served to sell toys to girls and “encourages girls and women to ‘buy into’ a very specific and peripheral kind of fandom” (ibid.).

*Forces of Destiny* functions as yet another example of *plastic representation*: objects that “serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more” (Warner 2017, n.p.). Warner uses Barbie as an example, but the reading applies to *Forces of Destiny* as well: Mattell produces visibly diverse versions of their dolls, yet the canonical version of Barbie is slim, white, straight, blue-eyed and blonde. Changing the skin tone or the body shape serves to give marginalised audiences represen-

tation within the franchise, but only on the surface, on a plastic level. While on the one hand *Forces of Destiny* acknowledges that there is a demand for more women protagonists and female fans within *Star Wars*, on the other hand it also meets those demands only in niche products, through easily marketable ways that reinforce gender stereotypes (dolls are for girls and female fans) and divisions (female fans are relegated to niche product lines).

To be fair, Disney *have* tried to market branded merchandise not just to girls, but also to women. Elizabeth Affuso takes the *Star Wars* CoverGirl makeup line as her case study and argues that the move of fan merchandise into a feminised market speaks volumes to the growing dominance of female fans in contemporary fan cultures. But at the same time, she points out that even though female fans are recognised as *Star Wars* fans, they are (yet again) relegated to a space that restricts their fandom to traditional, feminine modes of expression. This tendency “illuminates that as fan practices become more gender inclusive, they often simultaneously reinforce gender divides” (Affuso 2018, p. 184). Derek Johnson arrives at a similar conclusion in his analysis of the *HerUniverse* clothing line that was specifically created for female fans of *Star Wars*. According to Johnson, *HerUniverse* carved a specific niche for female consumers within the overall merchandising, with diversity being framed and compartmentalised as consumer choice. Rather than destabilising or challenging gender norms, this fan merchandise relies on classic Disney princess tropes (for young female fans), as well as doubling down on sexualised merchandise (for the older female fans). Either way, it reifies gendered stereotypes and “ushers female consumers into a hegemonically aged, gendered, and sexed iteration of *Star Wars* fandom” (Johnson 2014, p. 899). In other words: *HerUniverse* assumes it was necessary to create separate fan merchandise for girls, because regular *Star Wars* merchandise and fandom is not for girls in the first place.

### **Rey and Rose not included: the policing and protesting functions of paratexts**

While *Star Wars* films have always been blockbusters and heavily merchandised properties, this commercialisation reached new heights when Disney’s first *Star Wars* film (*The Force Awakens*) was marketed. Thousands of licensed products were released and

bought up by eager fans – children and adults alike. But almost immediately, fans felt a disturbance in the Force: amidst all the *Star Wars* mania and the avalanche of products for *The Force Awakens*, the film’s central character, Rey, was conspicuously missing. This was especially noticeable because the film had been hailed for its feminine agenda and attention to the diversity of the characters.

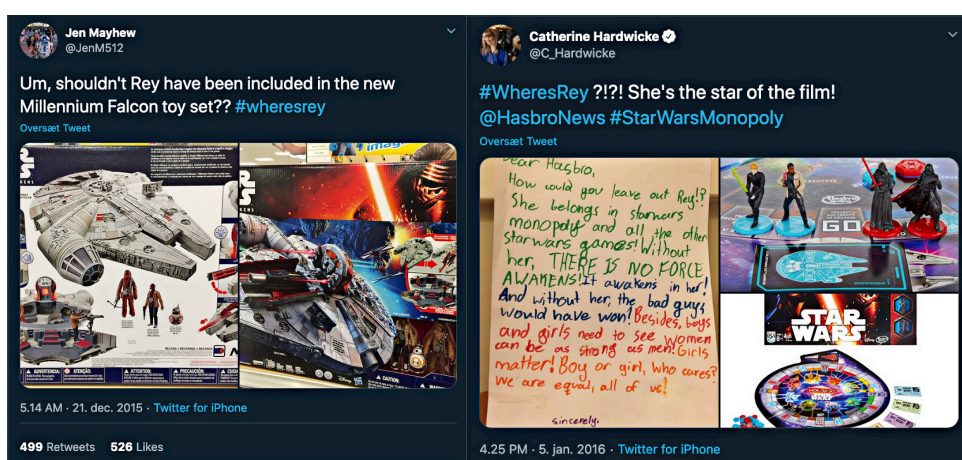


Figure 2. Fan outcry on Twitter, under the hashtag ‘#wheresrey’, due to the absence of the main character Rey in the many toy-merchandise paratexts of *The Force Awakens*.

Even in packages of action figures, Rey was missing. Fans were quick to draw parallels to other Disney-owned franchises which had also erased a female character from the package of action figures (Black Widow from the *Avengers* set, and Gamora from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* set). The only difference being that Rey is not just one member of an otherwise all-male ensemble of heroes, but the lead character of the film. The premium Hasbro play set came with a light-up Millennium Falcon, a BB-8, a Finn, a Chewbacca, but no Rey. The omission of Rey from The Millennium Falcon – a spaceship she steers in several key scenes in the film – quickly drew criticism from fans, who took to social media platforms and created the #wheresrey social movement, demanding a response. The movement merged fan-based and feminist-informed demands with social activism on social media platforms and “demonstrated how social-media-based protests targeted at consumer culture may become one of the most productive strategies for promoting gender

equality in modern culture" (Brown 2018, p. 337). In the same way as branded fan merchandise serves a paratextual function of policing a franchise, the fan activism on social media platforms functions as a paratextual reaction and public protest to the gender politics of such merchandise. The kind of fan activism represented by #wheresrey means that "fan-produced paratexts are weaponized to stage a broader feminist intervention" (Scott 2017, p. 142). Working with fan activism, Lori Kido Lopez points out that when we talk about fan activism, we are in fact usually describing active fans rallying around a common goal, "[y]et their goals often remain within the world of the text itself" (Lopez 2011, p. 432). In the case of #wheresrey, the fans were addressing a real-world social issue, targeting the systematic exclusion of female-based toys for fans.

One month prior to the film's release, Hasbro released the *Star Wars* Monopoly set, which also lacked the character of Rey. After the film premiered, fans yet again criticised Hasbro for not including Rey in the set. The initial response by Disney and Hasbro to the protests was that they wanted to prevent paratexts produced before the film premiered from spoiling any plot secrets. This excuse can be seen as an instance of *paratextual scapegoating*: "positioning the lack of Rey action figures and play sets as a benevolent act, an industrial effort to shield fans from being 'spoiled' on key plot points from the film" (Scott 2017, p. 144). This excuse disregards the fact that Rey was featured in numerous other paratexts in the promotional material. One of these is the first official film poster, released three months before the film: Rey and Kylo Ren are clearly positioned as adversaries, with Finn on Rey's side holding a lightsabre. Film trailers are another type of paratext, showing scenes of Rey and Finn running from a First Order Tie Fighter, clearly positioning both characters on the same side of the Rebellion.

Rey was eventually included in the *Star Wars* merchandise, the Monopoly set, the play sets and the action figure packages, probably as a reaction to the vocal critique and the fan activism on social media (Brown, 2018). Let us now fast forward to late 2019, when anticipation for the upcoming and final film in the *Star Wars* saga, *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), is building. The promotional paratexts reveal that the film will feature many characters from the previous films, including the fan favourite Rose Tico (Kelly Marie Tran), the first woman of colour to portray a leading character in a *Star Wars*

film. Fans quickly noticed a clear difference between the promotional pre-release material and the final merchandise available in the Disney Store. This time, it is Rose Tico that is missing.

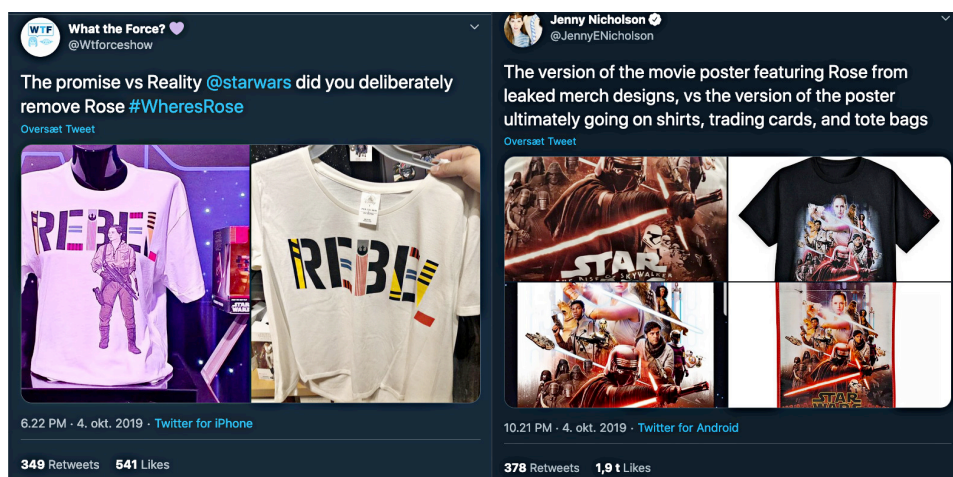


Figure 3: At the time of writing, *Star Wars* fans are taking to social media once again to protest against the absence of Rose Tico from the official merchandise, under the hashtag ‘#wheresrose’. The official material has paratextually erased Rose Tico by removing her completely. In one instance, Rose Tico was erased from a poster and replaced by a CGI alien slug.

According to Disney’s Q3 Financial Report, a growth in overall merchandise sales has been offset by a decrease in sales from specifically *Star Wars* merchandise (Bloomberg 2019, n.p.). This seems to suggest that Disney is not only returning to but also doubling down on the attempt to secure and increase the *Star Wars* brand amongst boys. According to an anonymous source, business magazine *Forbes* reported that prior to *The Force Awakens* “toymakers were specifically directed to exclude Rey from their products because *Star Wars* toys are geared at boys and boys allegedly don’t like playing with female action figures” (Kain 2016, n.p.). This aligns with Johnson’s analysis that “the historical organisation, production, and marketing of the *Star Wars* franchise has relied upon logics of gender difference that suggest unequal industry interest in reaching boys versus girls, and men versus women” (Johnson 2014, p. 900). From a franchise logics standpoint, Disney already has the girls’ demographics market well covered, primarily through The Disney Princesses, which quickly became the top licensed mer-

chandise property in the world. And that demographic is already buying *Brave* and *Frozen* products, so why should *Star Wars* cater to them too? In fact, this *paratextual policing* done by Disney could possibly be read as yet another bolstering of the boys' franchise. After all, Disney's acquisition of both Marvel in 2009 and Lucasfilm in 2012 can be seen as a move to gain access to a demographic group that Disney did not yet cover adequately: boys. The Disney Princesses line owes much of its success to the fact that it reinforces traditional and conservative conceptions of feminine ideals rather than challenging them, and why should *Star Wars* change a formula that already works?

### **Conclusion: the power of paratexts**

Merchandise provides us with paratextual clues about the primary text of a film; but Gray reminds us that it also has the capacity to "strengthen or weaken established meanings", and to "provide a space in which meanings can be worked through and refined" (Gray 2010, p. 178). In the case of *Star Wars*, the paratexts have a gatekeeping function, acknowledging certain audiences (men) while deterring others (female fans). In her analysis of the fan activist movement of #wheresrey?, Suzanne Scott points out that the apparent absence of Rey in the merchandise undermines the film's pseudo-feminist focus on a female protagonist by insisting on the continued exclusion of girls from its imagined fan base, exposing "how paratexts both reflect and refract franchises' gendered valuation of their (imagined) audience" (Scott 2017, p. 139), as well as, I may add, erasing the possibility that some boys might identify with heroines as much as heroes in *Star Wars*. This paratextual erasure of Rey highlights how "paratexts function to codify gendered franchising discourses" (ibid.). Paratextual material in all forms not only shapes our understanding of a text, but is also imbued with intense financial and emotional investments by fans. Sometimes this emotional investment turns into a site of struggle over the absence of a central character or a fan favourite from the merchandise paratexts, as was the case with both Rey and Rose. As such, merchandise can serve as a way of paratextually policing a franchise as well as the type of fandom it allows, while at the same time serving as a paratextual erasure and devaluation of female fans. Although the films promise to foreground diversity in representations and



female heroism, they are surrounded and walled off by paratexts rooted in reactionary franchising logics. When female fans are offered a paratextual pathway into the franchise, this is often done through various forms of “pink media franchising” (Johnson 2014), relegated into gendered spaces and stereotypes. This echoes the girl power rhetoric of the 1990s, in which the pursuit of physical perfection was recast as empowerment rather than freedom from traditional gendered constraints, with girls being “free to choose” these constraints if they so desired (Orenstein 2011, p. 7). A similar move, argues Derek Johnson, has been made by Disney with regard to *Star Wars*, “offering girls limited cultural choices based in hegemonic gender roles and narrow beauty ideals alone, but perhaps more so by making ‘pink’ choices attractive to consumers (both parents and children) as seemingly active routes to empowerment” (Johnson 2014, p. 897). This can be read as an expression of a broader *post-feminist culture* in which media serve as sites for new negotiations of gender, identity and power (in the aftermath of feminism’s call for change) in which girls are important figures. Through “consumer agency”, feminist politics are “articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed” (McRobbie 2009, p. 163). When fans took to social media platforms to ask the question #wheresrey, they were fighting back against the paratextual absence of female characters in toys and merchandise, protesting against the historically male-centric heroism of *Star Wars* as well as the implied postfeminist logics of Disney’s pink franchising offered to female fans. This kind of social media activism is just one amongst several types of paratextual fan resistance. Other forms include female fans creating their own DIY Rey merchandise (T-shirts and art), repurposing Bratz and Barbie dolls into Rey figures, and creating cosplay Rey costumes (Brown 2018, p. 345).

These examples all indicate the existence of a paratextual struggle between Disney and feminist-informed fan activism, which at its core can be read as a form of fan-disciplining described by Matt Hills as *fanagement*: industrial modes of “responding to [...] fan criticisms, as well as catering for specific fractions of fandom who might have otherwise be at odds with the unfolding brand, and attempting to draw a line under fan resistance” (Hills 2010, p. 410). Fanagement takes place in media tie-ins and paratexts (novels, radio plays, toys), seemingly celebrating the fan’s growing power

as important consumers of a media franchise, but ultimately shutting down particular types of fan debates and fan identities and diminishing “fan criticism of the brand” (ibid, p. 425). The male-centric culture of the *Star Wars* franchise thus expresses an inclusive gender ideology but steers female fans into appropriate gendered forms of their fandom. This type of gender-specific marketing and approved fan activity sends a strong signal that even though the *Star Wars* culture could in theory be for everyone, the reality is that boys are the primary target group and female fans are relegated to certain compartmentalised paratextual spaces outside the blockbuster main text.

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# Superheroes or Group of Heroes?

## The Avengers as Multiple Protagonist Superhero Cinema

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### Abstract

Heroes have often been thought of as singular individuals standing apart from the rest of the world, and the current superheroes are no exception. Even though their comic book counterparts exist in complex social networks of supporting characters and related colorful heroes, cinematic adaptations often “kowtow” to single-hero worship (Burke 2008, 101), isolating the hero from a larger narrative world and networks of characters. This changed with the success *The Avengers in*. This film and series which it was a part of – The Marvel Cinematic Universe - quickly became a trendsetter within the larger media landscape. In this article, I present a close formal analysis of *The Avengers* and contextualize it within the larger narrative of the cinematic universe. I argue that the film belongs to the genre of multiple protagonist cinema, yet in a form that straddles the line between the two usual variations of that form of cinema. Multiple protagonist cinema is usually either a form often reserved for non-mainstream, experimental narratives in one extreme or it is just a slight variation on pre-existing mainstream Hollywood formulas in the other extreme. *The Avengers* finds middle ground between these extremes, and manages to do so with special consideration to the superhero genre.

**Keywords:** *The Avengers*, superheroes, multiple protagonist cinema, film analysis, Marvel

### Introduction

2012's *The Avengers* was undoubtedly a watershed moment in cinematic history. In the film, six different comic book superheroes, previously appearing in five different films, come together and share the big screen for the first time. In this way, it became a reversal of the until-then dominant trend of putting a single superhero in a single film. The film leaned much further into the sprawling narratives of their native medium of comic books by bringing together a varied selection of characters from different film titles to interact with one another. As the following years made clear, it was an effective strategy for Marvel Studios which allowed their fast-growing series to take a lead at the global box office, and it was seen as a strategy worth imitating by other studios (McSweeney 2018, 6; Vignold 2018). Marvel Studios' efforts in building a cinematic universe have been discussed from an industrial perspective (e.g. Flanagan et al. eds 2016; Johnson 2012) and in terms of it being an unprecedented exemplar of transmedia storytelling (e.g. Richter 2016; Sweeney 2013).

This article adds to these discussions by performing a close analysis of the *Avengers* film in itself. The central purpose is to unveil how the film is constructed to accommodate an audience which has been accustomed to following a clear, single protagonist in films in general (see McKee 2010, 48-9; Snyder 2005, 183; Trottier 1998, 44), and in fantastical cinema more specifically (see Burke 2008; Hastrup 2011). First, this article argues that having multiple protagonists in superhero cinema has not been prominent before 2012, then I describe my methodology for examining *The Avengers*. After this I will analyze my results, which uncover how *the Avengers* is deliberately constructed to emphasize the group over any single hero. This analysis will move from a contextual discussion of actor and character fame into an analysis based on close textual segmentation and examination. Finally, I will discuss how the construction of *The Avengers* represents an innovation insofar as it borrows strategies both classical Hollywood cinema and more alternative multiple protagonist cinema.

### The Problems with Protagonists in the Plural

Works of fiction with multiple or group protagonists have often been thought of as an alternative to the more mainstream and classical ways of constructing a story. Both in literature and fiction, they are often associated with working class fiction or social realism (see e.g. Foley 1993; Jørgensen 2015; Klysner 1976; Tröhler 2007). Perhaps its most extreme cinematic exemplification can be found in the Soviet cinema of the silent era where the “protagonists” - such as they were - were an unindividualized group, whereas the antagonists were clearly personified archetypes and members of groups who were opposed to a worker’s revolution (Tröhler 2007). All of this would seem to be rather antithetical to superhero cinema, where the extraordinary individual is the focal point.

Heroes in general have often been thought of as singular individuals standing apart from the rest of the world (Carlyle 1993) - and thus not easily reduced to faces in the crowd or mere group players. The current superheroes are no exception. There is no shortage of recent scholarly works comparing them to divine figures (e.g. LoCicero 2007; Morrison 2011; Saunders 2011) or saying that they are “the closest our modern culture has to myths” (Coogan 2006, 124). In the comic books which originated the bulk of them, many heroes have been involved in ever-developing stories for decades, encompassing thousands of pages, hundreds of events and dozens and dozens of characters (see e.g. Alberich et al. 2002; Kaveney 2007, 25). On the big screen however, superheroes were until recently “a lonely breed” (Burke 2008, 100), walled off in their own movies, with only their own immediate supporting cast to sustain them. This is no doubt not just due to the exceptional nature of any given hero which must be given room to breathe within the runtime of a single film, but also due to movie studios asking themselves “Why have ten heroes in one movie, when you can have ten movies with a hero all their own?” (Burke 2008, 101).

However, although they are far from the norm, the more classical Hollywood corpus is not without its share of films with multiple protagonists. These can generally be placed on a spectrum as described by Thompson (1999). On one end are films with several plotlines each with their own protagonist, but where events have little causal impact on one another (Ibid., 47) and on the other end are films in which “a group of people, several of whom are roughly

equal in prominence and who work toward a shared goal" (Thompson 1999, 48). Empirically, it has proven to be possible, if difficult, for audience members to track contradictory goals of characters across a film (Magliano et al. 2005). It is therefore unsurprising that many action films with large casts, and I argue *The Avengers* in particular, are mostly toward the latter end of the scale Thompson presents. Though disagreements between character goals may appear, they are ultimately subsumed under a shared goal by the end of the film. Allowances are made by Thompson for some semblance of hierarchy among characters in these films (Thompson 1999, 248). A logical follow-up question to this might then be how much one character may stand out from the crowd, before they are the undisputed main character, thus rendering the film a poor example of a multiple protagonist film. Israel (2006) for instance mentions that a closer inspection of several films revolving around sports teams usually reveals a single, undisputed protagonist. Similarly, Hastrup (2011, 276-7) concludes that within the fantastical genres of "popular" multiple protagonist films, an "overt hero" usually emerges - her examples focusing on the *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* franchises.

Are we then to expect *The Avengers* in particular, to – as Burke claims is the norm for previous superhero cinema - "kowtow to the prevailing single-hero worship" (Burke 2011, 101)? If not, how is this balancing complicated by the fact that these are pre-existing characters, not only known from other media, but also from previous solo outings on the big screen? At the time, this was largely untested in cinema. The question is in fact so central to the construction of *The Avengers* that it is actually asked within the film itself by the villain, Loki. The alien god of mischief is so convinced of his triumph because he finds it inconceivable that such a superhero team-up would work. One of the Avengers themselves even remarks "We're not a team, we're a time bomb". Perhaps they voice the concerns of audiences (and the producers) as well? In any case, the question of the soundness of this superhero team-up obviously demands an answer by the composition of the film.

### Approach and Methodology

In order to determine how *The Avengers* (2012) is composed, I will examine the film closely both in a close textual analysis, as well as



consider its paratextual context. This is because both I and, presumably the filmmakers, recognize that a film is always read through the contextual cues of other films and the audience's previous knowledge of both characters, filmmakers and actors. My aim is not to empirically uncover audience members' experiences of following the many protagonists of this film, though this would certainly be a valuable inquiry. Rather, my argument is that the film is constructed to anticipate a varied audience knowledge of the many characters. Therefore, the filmmakers use several different tried and true heuristics for determining the protagonist of a given film to code all six major characters as the protagonist, to varying degrees, only to then emphasize the group identity as central in the final parts of the film.

My approach and methodology are highly inspired by the formal approaches of film scholars David Bordwell (2007) and Kristin Thompson (1999). From Bordwell I mainly borrow formal cues in determining the protagonist of any given film, which I subsequently operationalize. This operationalizing is then tempered through a framework highly inspired by Thompson. The six heuristic cues inspired by Bordwell are as follows:

- (1) *Paratext and context* - Which character is played by the most famous actor or actress in the cast.
- (2) *Screen time* - "registering how long a character is onstage" (Bordwell 2007, 7.)
- (3) *Morality* - Which character possess the *system of values* the audience is assumed to agree the most with.
- (4) *Sympathy* - Which character is the most *sympathetic* to the audience.
- (5) *Change* - Which character is the most *affected or changed* by the story's events.
- (6) *Power* - Which characters is the most *powerful* within the story.

The first cue necessitates a placing of the film in its context, as I will do in the next section. In addition to discussing actor fame and celebrity, as Bordwell suggests, I will also discuss the fame of characters. The subsequent five cues are discussed through a close reading of the film. I operationalize these in terms of a segmentation of the film – a division of the film into parts for analysis (Bordwell and

Thompson 2013, 504). This is done to recover “the architecture of the movie” (69). I have performed a segmentation of the film in which the scene is the smallest unit. I define a scene as any single unit of narration without significant shifts in time or space facilitated by editing. While the actual screen time of characters found as a result of this is an approximation based on segment lengths, and thus does not account for characters leaving or entering scenes, the number of scenes each character appears in is an exact measure. A more granular approach (for instance down to a shot-by-shot basis) might have had the advantage of revealing a greater degree of detail and nuance of the architecture of the film, and how its narration prioritizes certain characters and emotional states. However, I argue that the approach I have here still has the advantage of quantifiable units of measurements that can then be combined with more qualitative readings of the film’s text.

This quantification of the film is advantageous for answering the question of screen time in raw numbers. Of course, not all screen time is created equal: The order of the events presented will always be of paramount importance, and I will discuss this more in depth with reference to Thompsons (1999) work on Hollywood cinema. This leads me on to discuss the four next cues, tempering them through reference to the segmentation. Especially the two last cues - those of *change* and *power* will be given special consideration, as they entail a consideration of both the serial nature of the film, and the emphasis on power(s) in the superhero genre.

I stress that the combination of qualitative reading and quantification of narrative segments and their (character) contents is necessary for a true negotiation of the heuristics. As Bordwell (2007) points out, it is not given that all six of the heuristics will give the same answer, and careful consideration must then be given to comparing and contrasting their relative importance. This is what allows me to uncover the narrative strategies within the composition of *The Avengers* which each contribute to no single “overt hero” emerging.

### Actor and Character Fame

As mentioned, Bordwell (2006, 8) argues that a common rule of thumb for figuring out the main character of a film is identifying the most famous actor in the cast. The strategy utilized to counter this in *the Avengers* and the Marvel Studios opus at large is - success-

fully or not - to emphasize the primacy of characters over actors. This is most thoroughly examined by Koh (2014) who terms it as a practice of “celeactor labour” in which the actors are subsuming their own identities under those of the characters in question. In this view, it is “the celeactor, not the human actor portraying it, who is of paramount importance to the franchise.” (Koh 2014, 495).

The casting of the initially “lesser-known stars as leads” (Koh 2014, 485) in the films is thus a “canny strategy by Marvel Studios to manage paratextual star narratives and trajectories, the verisimilitude of the onscreen fantasy, and the studio’s present and future bargaining leverage” (Koh 2014, 485).

How successful this business strategy has been at large in the long term is debatable. Evidence seems to support that a hierarchy of actors still exists within Marvel Studios, most notably in their allegedly preferential treatment of Robert Downey Jr., who plays the Iron Man (e.g. Breznican 2011; Donnelly 2012; Vieira 2013). However, the strategy is in line with recent research suggesting that the expected profit of a movie featuring a movie star may not be higher than the expected profit of a film without any stars (Albert 1999; De Vany & Walls 2004; Skilton 2009).

Even if we accept the primacy of character over actor however, this just seems to push the problem of picking a protagonist one step further down the line. Will an audience member not just pick the most famous character then, and decide that they are the protagonist? This is certainly a possibility, and leaves a job cut out for the screenwriter and director if they are to emphasize the group over the individual. Character-based franchises as such are nothing new in cinema (e.g. Bennett and Woollacott 1987; Scott 2009), and *The Avengers* has certainly been discussed as “a cinematic display for Marvel’s most valuable character *assets*” (Stork 2014, 78 emphasis in original).

While fictional characters with lives across many different media and settings may attain the status of pop cultural icons or “popular heroes” (cf. Bennett and Woollacott 1987) which general audiences may have a familiarity with through indirect pop cultural awareness, this should not be taken for granted. For instance, a radical reimagining of a character superhero comics is usually reserved for the most popular characters, in which case the unexpected and unfamiliar can be seen as ironic or subversive, as well as comprehen-

sible to a broad audience (see e.g. Bagger 2019). And the six Avengers were certainly not the most popular characters prior to their big screen debuts.

*The Avengers* can be viewed as a direct sequel to five previous films, *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America The First Avenger* (2011). The four title characters from these five films, as well as Natasha Romanoff aka “Black Widow” (who had a supporting role in *Iron Man 2*) and Clint Barton aka “Hawkeye” (Who had a minor appearance in *Thor*) are the six protagonists of this outing. However, these films had wildly differing audience attendance (see **Figure 1**) and thus general audience familiarity could not be assumed.

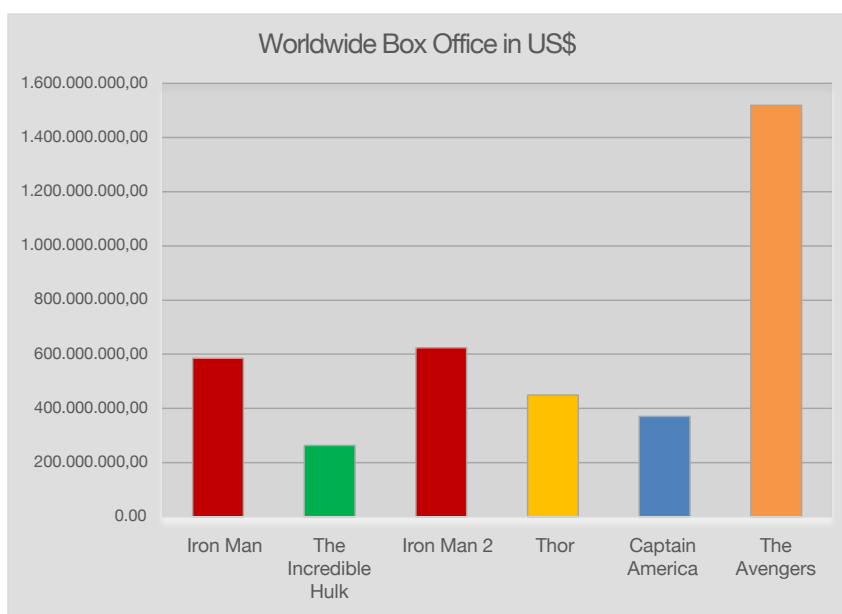


Figure 1 –  
Worldwide Box Office in US\$ of the first six Marvel Studios films.

Furthermore, neither of the six main characters in the film were exactly the comic book superheroes on most people’s minds before their big screen debuts. The Hulk was arguably the most widely known before his MCU debut, not just due to a tangentially related film outing half a decade earlier (2003), but also due to a relatively popular TV series (1978-1982). Iron Man was also considered a “second string” superhero (McSweeney 2018, 42), and had only

a mildly successful cartoon to his name in recent memory. While Thor, the Norse god of thunder was certainly a well-known mythological figure (Arnold 2011), his Marvel incarnation was no household name. And finally, Captain America might be regarded as an example of a “nationalist superhero” (Dittmer 2013), who might not hold much global appeal. Thus, though the film is a display of Marvels character assets, it must be mentioned that these were certainly not their most well-known characters. Most of Marvels most famous characters (e.g. Spider-Man and the X-Men) were licensed off to other studios at the time (Stork 2014).

The sparse existing research on reception of multiple protagonist cinema suggests that audience member will generally try to seek out a single character with whom to identify or follow along, often based on their preconceived notions of actors or directors (Azcona 2005). While any member of the audience of *The Avengers* may be familiar with any of the pre-existing characters in the film, it remained an open question which of them it would be, and how far this familiarity would extend. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the film’s writer and director of the film Joss Whedon, is familiar with multiple protagonist productions with pre-existing characters with whom the audience were likely not familiar. He had worked with a similar scenario when adapting his own cancelled and never fully aired television series *Firefly* (2002) into the film *Serenity* (2005) (Pascale 2014, 338). In the following, I will take a closer look at the case of *The Avengers* itself to see how it was composed to anticipate this.

### Screen time, Morality and Sympathy

Next, I turn to the textual cues inspired by Bordwell. Given my segmentation of the film the most obvious cue to try and ascertain here is of course *screen time*, but as we shall see, this proves problematic without also considering other factors such as a character’s morality and sympathy. Below I present a table which outlines an estimate of how much time each character spends “onstage” – both in raw time, and as a proportion of the films running time.

At first glance, Iron Man emerges as a rather clear lead in the film. He has the most time on screen, his character’s previous films had drawn the most box office, he is played by arguably the most well-known actor, an actor apparently able to have some leverage over the composition and content of the film (Breznican 2011; Donnelly

Character	First Scene	Scenes	%Scenes	Screen time (Est.)	Screen time%
Hawkeye	00:03:41	37	23,1%	28:00	21%
Black Widow	00:12:05	35	21,9%	51:00	38,3%
The Hulk	00:15:41	30	18,7%	38:39	29,02%
Captain America	00:20:40	40	25%	55:49	41,91%
Iron Man	00:23:12	40	25%	57:28	43,15%
Thor	00:43:48	30	18,7%	39:42	29,8%

**Table 1** – The six Avengers characters broken down by time of first onscreen appearance, an estimated number of appearances in both scenes and screen time.

2012). However, Iron Man, while certainly prominent, barely edges out Captain America for screen time. In fact, another survey of character screen time for the news medium *Vulture* - using a different methodology - has the Captain edging out Iron Man for screen time, but is otherwise in agreement with my survey about the order of screen time for the characters (Cruz 2012).

The Captain is arguably the character possessing the system of values with which the audience is expected to agree the most. Interestingly, Captain America is a potential shoe-in for a point-of-view character as he is a fish out of temporal water, and thus largely unfamiliar with the film’s universe. Thus, he might have become an efficient audience proxy and thus the de facto protagonist. This potential goes mostly untapped, as the narration of the film never explicitly emphasizes the Captains reaction to the other characters or events. Thus, while he may be the moral center of the story, Captain America is far from an audience proxy, and is arguably the least personally affected by its events (cf. the cue of *change*).

A character that is arguably slightly more of an audience proxy, as much as a trained secret agent can be, is Black Widow. Her early entrance into the plot introduces her before some of the more well-known superheroes. Most of the long talkative scenes of the film involve Black Widow in some way, including her introductory scene (03:30), her (and the audience’s) introduction to Banner (03:19) and her interrogation of Loki (02:31). All these scenes allow for a great deal of reflection of her character. These scenes strike a bal-

ance between framing Black Widow as in danger while at the same time revealing her to be deceptive and ultimately in control of the situation, only feigning her fear. This is subverted in a fourth case - when she is chased down by an enraged Hulk. This scene borrows many cues from horror cinema and emphasizes her terrified reaction. She thus gains in terms of audience sympathy - a popular heuristic for picking a protagonist - but her status as a morally dubious and deceptive assassin is a counterbalance to this.

Black Widow's personal involvement in the story is motivated by her relation to Hawkeye, who is the mind-controlled thrall of Loki throughout roughly three fourths of the film. While an argument can be made that he is thus the character most immediately affected by the events of the story, as he is the most obvious victim of Loki's actions, Hawkeye is without question the least prominent of the six main characters.

Thus, the general narration of the film is not composed to prioritize any single character. This point will become clearer in the following section where I discuss the characters in terms of their respective arcs (i.e. a heuristic of how much they are affected or changed by the story), and how their respective relations and personal involvements factor into the overall plot of the film.

### Character Arcs

The discussion of cinematic character arcs - or how characters are *changed* by the events of a given film - usually revolves around a single main character (e.g. McKee 2010, 48-9; Snyder 2005, 183; Trotter 1998, 44) while only rarely several characters have distinct arcs (e.g. Gerke 2010, 79). American cinema in particular has a number of notable examples of protagonists striking a balance between sharing an overall goal, and having distinct character arcs (cf. Ray 1996, 190-1; Wood 1981, 90; see also Thompson 1999). The more a character is clearly affected and changed by the story, the more likely they are to be seen as the protagonist, according the heuristic of *change*.

The major characters in *The Avengers* do have individual arcs - but I argue that these arcs are in fact truncated repetitions of their previous films' appearances. This truncation is already a tendency in alternative cinema featuring a multitude of characters (Smith 1999). Each of the four superheroes that have previously headlined their own film go through a familiar development. Iron Man goes

from hostile and arrogant to ultimately selfless and self-sacrificing, as he did in both his previous films. Bruce Banner goes from rejecting his Hulk persona to ultimately embracing it to combat a greater threat in the heart of New York, as in *The Incredible Hulk*. Thor once again has to come to terms with his adoptive brother's villainous impulses and take up arms against him. Similarly, while Captain America goes through little in terms of internal change, the exterior elements of this storyline - being restricted and kept in the dark by his military superiors, only to ultimately desert from them and act according to his convictions - carries strong echoes from his previous outing in *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

In terms of character involvement in the central conflict, Iron Man – who otherwise leads in screen time and actor recognition - is not personally involved until the transition into the climax of the film. The character with the most personally at stake in the conflict of the film is arguably Thor, who is pitted against his adoptive brother Loki. The plot is thus a direct continuation of Thor's own debut film. However, the prominence of Thor's emotional development is mitigated by his late appearance, which also feeds into the heuristic cue of *power*, which I shall treat more thoroughly later on.

If no character develops beyond their psychological status at the end of their previous film outing, then it is hard to pick an undisputed central protagonist of the film. This does not exclude larger multi-instalment character arcs from happening as in serial television (see Porter et al 2002; Newman 2006, 23), but it also makes the film in question relatively self-contained. All the characters ultimately had to be thought of as interesting enough to view not only in the context of this story, but also in potential future sequels where they would once again break out on their own, and not be surrounded by their newly-formed group.

### Compartmentalization

The superhero archetype is often considered part of a structural system including helpers, love interests and villains who in turn structurally constitute the hero (Burke 2008, 14). *The Avengers* departs radically from this as the group identity of the Avengers team is the focus at the expense of heroes interacting with their pre-existing networks. As expressed by writer-director Whedon: "You need to separate the characters from their support systems in order to



create the isolation you need for a team.” (quoted in Donnelly 2012, para 2). Only Iron Man gets to interact with his love interest, while Thor has to be satisfied with a photo. Captain America’s is relegated to a deleted scene (Schaefer 2012), while Banner’s love interest has all but “been abandoned” (Beaty 2016, 323).

This becomes even more explicit in the tables below showing how many segments (out of a possible 160) the respective heroes spend with the minor characters in the film, many of whom they have previously interacted with, as opposed to how often they share the screen with the other heroes or are without major or minor characters around them:

**Table 2** – Number of character co-appearances in *The Avengers*. An \* marks if the two characters interacted in a previous film.

	Iron Man	Captain America	Banner	Thor	Black Widow	Hawkeye
Fury	7*	9*	6	6	12*	6
Hill	3	4	2	2	3	10
Coulson	2*	5	5	3*	3*	4
Loki	7	4	7	6*	11	9
Pepper	1*	0	0	0	0*	0
Selvig	3	1	1	1*	3	2

**Table 3** – How many times two given Avengers co-appear within *The Avengers*.

	Iron Man	Captain America	Banner	Thor	Black Widow	Hawkeye
Iron Man	-	27	14	18	17	9
CptAmr	27	-	16	18	23	12
Banner	14	16	-	16	18	5
Thor	18	18	16	-	16	7
B.Widow	17	23	18	16	-	14
Hawkeye	9	12	5	7	14	-

Not only are the characters’ preexisting relationships to both the on- and off-screen supporting cast usually paid the barest of lip-service, the main characters within the film who have previously shared the screen barely interact. Hawkeye and Thor get exactly

one exchange of dialogue, while Iron Man’s conversations with Black Widow across all their 17 co-appearances consist entirely of him giving her a snide greeting, which she never responds to. The emphasis is clearly on the new dynamics of previously unconnected characters, or the group as a whole. This is even more evident when one considers the over-all composition of the film into the usual four large-scale segments proposed by Thompson (1999) and takes a closer look at the patterns in which the characters appear in these segments.

Avengers in scene :	Setup (00:27-31:39)	Complicating Action (31:40-01:03:28)	Development (01:03:29-01:38:20)	Climax (01:38:21-02:12:21)
One	16	8	14	17
Two	1	0	19	7
Three	0	5	2	1
Four	0	2	0	1
Five	0	1	5	1
Six	0	0	0	4

**Table 4** – A segmentation of the film into four large parts, inspired by Thompson (1999) and a distribution of how many scenes contain what number of Avengers across the given large-scale segments.

As is evident from the table - the first fourth of the film mostly shows the six protagonists in scenes by themselves. In the Complicating Action, the protagonists are still occasionally walled off from each other, but they are just as likely to appear in groups of three or four, slowly gathering and getting to know one another - even though interpersonal tensions are obvious. This comes to a head in the one scene in the Complicating Action in which five of the six protagonists are together, bickering and distrustful of one another. This scene coincides with a sneak attack by Loki and an enthralled Hawkeye, which sends the Avengers shuffling into action, and into the part of the film known as The Development. Here two-on-two segments are more common, either in the form of cooperation (Captain America and Iron Man fixing a failing jet turbine) or confrontation (an unruly Hulk chasing down Black Widow or brawling with Thor). It is not until the Climax of the film - the extended battle for New York, that all six members of the hero group share the stage for the first time. Thus, the film is structurally composed

to emphasize the unity of the six Avengers as common arc. This becomes even more evident when discussing the final heuristic, that of power.

### **With Great Power Comes Great Teamwork**

The aspect of power is perhaps worth giving extra consideration in a superhero action film. Power in general and superhuman skills in particular are no doubt central to the appeal of the superhero. In an uncharitable framing, this is due the genre appealing to “a prepubescent teenage boy, who feels weak in the world and insufficient to the demands of the day” (Faludi 2007, 51). More charitably, it is merely in the allegedly universal pleasure of seeing creative use of unusual skills unfold in action characters (e.g. Langkjær and Jensen 2019). In a purely compositional perspective, it is very interesting to consider that the six Avengers are ultimately presented in an ascending order of “might”, as previously discussed. The relative power scale is even made explicit through a series of inter-team skirmishes throughout the film. The more super powered a character is, the later that character appears in the film. The anomaly here is Bruce Banner. In his civilian guise he has no superhuman powers, while his Hulk persona is perhaps an unmatched force. The Hulk persona however, does not appear until the Development portion of the film. Additionally, while the Hulk is arguably the most powerful character within the film, besting both of the alien gods Thor and Loki in unarmed combat, he is also regarded with suspicion and unease by a number of the other main characters. The degree to which Banner can control his Hulk persona is withheld by the narration until the Climax portion of the film, and the character is therefore more mysterious than identifiable to the audience.

However, the use of power and superpower within the film is even more complex than this. Langkjær and Jensen (2019) attest that within the study of characters in action films, emphasis has - perhaps paradoxically - usually not been on the main characters *people who can skillfully perform actions*. Here again, *The Avengers* is composed to emphasize both individual displays of impressive skill and, importantly, even more fantastical displays of skill in the teamwork of the Avengers members. This is clearly evident in the final fourth of the film, what Thompson calls the Climax (1999). Here scenes from the film regularly alternate between showing the

superheroes performing individual feats of strength of agility, and showing them almost effortlessly combining their skills for even more devastating attacks against the alien army. Iron Man doesn't just take down an alien by a self-directed Jonah-and-the-Whale maneuver, he also bounces his lasers off Captain Americas shield. Hulk doesn't just single-handedly flatten the manipulative Loki mid-monologue, he also jams a large piece of metal shrapnel into the back of an alien leviathan, which Thor then electrocutes without looking twice.

The climactic section of the film also demonstrates an interesting reversal of a central tenet of the earliest multiple protagonist cinema: Instead of individually characterized villains and the protagonists who are an indistinct group as in early Soviet cinema (cf. Tröhler 2007), we have the reverse. While our heroes are clearly defined, the aliens they fight against are animalistic, monstrous and an indistinct horde. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than the fact that the destruction of the alien mothership also kills all the individual aliens. The aliens have no individual existence outside the hive – whereas the Avengers exist both as distinct individuals and as group members.

This final fourth also contains some of the only stylistic ornamentations of the film, and these coincide with the presence of all the main characters onscreen at once. Firstly, this occurs when the team is finally united in opposition to the alien force, which is underlined by a circular camera movement around the battle-ready superheroes. This has been described as a celebration of a “moment of superhero synergy” (Stork 2014, 78). The circular camera movement here captures an elated and triumphant feeling, not unlike how similar camera movements are used for moments of lovers uniting in romantic cinema (cf. Højbjerg 2014). But, as I have established - romance takes quite a backseat to teambuilding in this film.

Perhaps more notably, these moments of flourish include a digitally composed *long take* lasting more than a minute, in which the camera travels through the streets of New York in a relay race between the six Avengers, who are effortlessly aiding one another. The stylistic flourishes have been compared to a filmed version of the comic book “splash page” (Willems 2019), which is an attention-grabbing way to compose a page in a comic. In the same way, these flourishes are particularly attention-grabbing in the composition of

this film, and emphasize the unity of the team. Even the action and camerawork of the film seems to leave little doubt behind: The six main characters in unison are clearly framed as more than the sum of their parts.

### Discussion

If superheroes are usually thought of as singular, superhuman or divine figures - as previously discussed - then what does this type of unification on the big screen signify? Perhaps one of the most concise observations has been put forward by Acu (2016), who discusses how the Marvel films have reframed the heroic "from the ability to do anything to the ability to meaningfully contribute through one's affiliations" (ibid., 195). I agree with this, and posit that this true in two significant ways: First it is true in the sense of fictional characters and heroes gaining value through *who* they know, and secondly, it is true in the sense of what these heroes can *perform and accomplish together*.

The first point represents an emphasis on what might loosely be termed a form of "network power" (cf. Castells 2011). Here the character become particularly interesting because they might at any point interact with a myriad of other characters in the same fictional universe. This has obvious advantages in terms of delivering "fan service" for an audience with knowledge of the source material (see Beaty 2016), but since die-hard fans will only ever be "a fraction" (Burke 2012, 96) of eventual audiences, this might be more broadly construed as a showcasing and demonstration of "character assets" (cf. Stork 2014) which can then validate one another by their mutual connection.

The second point represents one step further from being impressed at a single hero's skilled use of their human or superhuman abilities (cf. Langkjær & Jensen 2019). Now, these heroes can perform even more impressive synergistic acts with one another. These characters are fundamentally appealing in part because of their superhuman capabilities, and their interactions are meant to reflect new and exciting ways of showcasing these.

In this way, *The Avengers* is not only a lynchpin of the Marvel Cinematic Universe - but also represents a sort of "middle ground" between the classical narrative strategies of Hollywood cinema and more emergent, alternative approaches. In the former, a goal-orient-

ed protagonist goes through a series of events with a clear logical causality. In the more alternative approach often exemplified by multiple protagonist cinema - the interactions between equally prominent characters is the appeal and focus in and of itself (Israel 2010). Here, in order to create a transmedial and transtextual shared universe, borrowing from both approaches is needed in the specific construction of this film. Thus, while the Marvel Cinematic Universe exists narratively as something “more complex and intertwined” than episodic television (Proctor 2014, 6) and as something “unprecedented in American Cinema” (Sweeney 2013, 146), I have argued that its success can also be understood through media-specific modes of analysis.

### Conclusion

The central claim of this article is that a media-specific analysis of *The Avengers* (2012) reveals a strategic narrative construction which emphasizes a group of six heroes over any single “overt hero”. This is determined by both a number textual and contextual heuristics. Textually, it is evident that many of the cues utilized to determine the clear protagonist of any given film are set to work against each other: The most *sympathetically* presented character (Black Widow) is arguably the most morally dubious and also the least powerful. The character with the *value system* that can reasonably be assumed to be the one the audience is expected to identify as “correct” (Captain America) is relatively de-centered, and has perhaps the least explicit character arc - being the least affected by the story’s events, and the least personally involved. The most *personally involved* (Thor) is the last to appear, having proportionally less screen time and is the one *most personally affected* by the events (Hawkeye) is arguably the least prominent. The issue of *power* is alleviated by how far along in the runtime the characters first appear. The more powerful they are, the later they are introduced. Finally, the climax of the film is composed in both form and content to show that, no matter what their individual power may be, their group identity ultimately supersedes it.

With the added considerations of “celebrity labour” (Koh 2014) which ostensibly subsumes actor identity under character identity, the aim is clearly to create character-based franchises (Scott 2009) not unlike those of the comics. A venture like *The Avengers* film thus

indeed becomes a display window for “character assets” (cf. Stork 2014) in ways which appear carefully constructed. That these characters attain a synergistic power in their big screen co-debut is therefore a strategic choice in both a narrative and business sense. Both characters and actor were relatively unknown before their big screen debuts. While much of this is comprehensible through a lens of transmedia studies, I have here argued for a methodological approach of very close textual analysis informed by media-specific heuristics and observations. This is the central methodological and empirical contribution of this article.

To return the question posed earlier in this article: Why bother having six superheroes in one movie, when you could give each of them their own film instead? In short, with the right construction, the result will be a film that is both comprehensible on its own, and presents the characters in such a way that audience engagement can be had with most of them – both individually and in unison. This approach then ostensibly allows the characters to disseminate from this particular film and into many other channels.

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## Self-Sacrifice and the Transformation of the Hero

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### **Abstract**

The literary notion of a hero is often steeped in great deeds, such as vanquishing the monster, completing Herculean tasks, or protecting the innocent from harm. The medium of the comic book also provides numerous tales of self-sacrifice that add weight to the legitimacy of a hero and their contribution to a particular society or cause. This article will consider certain themes within the self-sacrificing hero narrative in order to gain further insight into this phenomenon and will draw inspiration from Greek and Norse mythology as well as the Superhero genre within comics and film. Finally, this article will consider the cyclical nature of the hero's journey and the importance of continual heroic rebirth in sustaining their legacy for new generations of comic book readers and film audiences. What does their sacrifice mean when the hero and even their universe is reborn at a later date?

*Keywords:* heroism, self-sacrifice, sacrifice, superhero, journey

## The Hero's Journey

The first widely agreed upon feature of sacrifice is that it must involve a cost to the agent performing the act (Van Ackeren and Archer 2018, 302).

In order to attain heroic status, a hero must typically undergo some form of transformation to evolve beyond their current status at the beginning of a story. Noted author Joseph Campbell's concept of the hero's journey consists of a multitude of events that the hero may undertake in the course of their journey. These include the initial 'call to adventure', 'refusal of the call', 'supernatural aid', 'the crossing of the first threshold', and many more until the hero completes their journey and gains something from the experience on a deep level. Ultimately, they are transformed by the experience, and a new threshold of knowledge is attained. Campbell posits that the typical journey of the mythological hero is, "a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (Campbell 1949, 23). Examples of these mythical heroes in Greek culture include Prometheus who journeyed to the heavens, stole the secret of fire from the Gods themselves, and descended with his newfound knowledge. Similarly, Jason undertook a perilous seafaring voyage that avoided the clashing Cyanean Rocks, defeated a dragon and returned home with the fabled Golden fleece (Campbell 1949, 23). As with many tales of heroic deeds in Greek mythology, these heroes often paid a heavy price during their journey, and if the hero should upset the Gods or break an oath, then their punishment would be great. Jason's epic story ends with a broken oath to his wife Medea, who had helped him to capture the golden fleece from her father. Medea's rage was so great that she killed the two sons that she had by Jason, as well as his new bride, leaving him a broken man (Alvanou 2015, 328). Jason's duplicitous nature ultimately transgresses the definition of a hero as Christopher Vogler argues, "A Hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others, like a shepherd who will sacrifice to protect and serve his flock. At the root the idea of Hero is connected with self-sacrifice" (Vogler 2007, 29). Therefore, despite his epic quest, Jason has not attained new wisdom and fails to success-

fully complete the hero's journey as posited by Campbell. Instead of dedicating his life to Medea and his two children, his desire for a new bride associated with royalty and power indicates that his motives are purely selfish and not befitting of a true hero.

### **Self-sacrifice and the Superhero genre**

In Superhero mythology, the self-sacrifice of Steve Rogers during World War II arguably paves the way for an entire Marvel Universe, both in the printed comics (*Captain America* 1941) and the Marvel Comic Universe (MCU) (*Captain America: The First Avenger* 2011). While *Iron Man* (2008) is rightfully considered the first MCU title, the character of Steve Rogers provides an integrity and moral compass for a new generation of superheroes to emulate. Initially rejected by the U.S. Army due to ill-health, Rogers willingly agrees to take part in a risky experiment that aims to augment his physical body and turn him into the costumed Captain America. Fortunately, the experimental formula succeeds and he is miraculously transformed into a 'super soldier' with enhanced strength, durability, and speed. This willingness to risk his very life exhibits the archetypal traits of a 'true hero', as defined by Vogler,

True heroism is shown in stories when Heroes offer themselves on the altar of chance, willing to take the risk that their quest for adventure may lead to danger, loss, or death. Like soldiers who know that by enlisting they have agreed to give their lives if their country asks them to, Heroes accept the possibility of sacrifice (Vogler 2007, 32).

Unfortunately, Vogler's definition appears problematic when we consider the violent means of the soldier/terrorist, or dictator, which places their extreme ideals and group mentality above the fundamental rights of others. It could be argued that all forms of military conflict provide catalysts for myriad forms of heroism and sacrifice, but that they also provide horrific accounts of mass killings, torture, and violence against civilians on both sides. In contrast to the 'hero as soldier', authors Alex Romagnoli and Gian Pagnucci argue that a Superhero, 'represents the best qualities of humanity: altruism, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and responsibil-

ity. Superheroes fight because they have to, but their messages still resound without the violence and without the hard-edged personas' (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013, 119). Author Travis Smith also posits a balanced view on Captain America's heroic qualities and notes the evolution of the character from war hero, to someone who is willing to help the oppressed regardless of their country, race or creed, 'He might even join them in fighting for their own liberty, providing inspiration and a model to emulate, but he would not come as a conqueror. Captain America does not rule, despite all of his excellences, because he stands for a government based on self-rule, individual and collective' (Smith 2018, 104). Romagnoli, Pagnucci, and Smith appear to select the more altruistic and humane aspects of the Superhero archetype, thereby promoting heroes with an ethical and moral maturity suitable to help a global society and the rights of the individual. However, it is not certain that Captain America stands for any government, as his involvement in global conflicts and 'cosmic' antagonists, often brings him into conflict with the government and military forces both in the printed comic and within the recent Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).

Although Steve Rogers wants to play his part in World War II by serving his country in the battlefield, his initial desire to join the war effort arguably stems from a need to belong, as noted by Parker Shaw and Tonya Hammer, 'Steve's personal narrative reflects a person who may not feel as if he matters. Steve's desire to contribute and be seen to contribute appears to be an innate need' (Shaw and Hammer 2016, 119). By becoming more than human, this enhanced soldier has found his place among other fighting men who are willing to lay down their lives for a shared goal. His new body has enabled him to find a purpose that his former frail body could not, but his capacity to fight when the odds seem overwhelming are what truly set him apart from most men. His apparent death at the end of World War II in the frozen Arctic, and subsequent 'rebirth' decades later is another sacrifice that Rogers makes in order to save others. Unfortunately, this sacrifice and continuation of his hero's journey cruelly robs him of his place and status in society. When Rogers re-emerges, he is now something of a cultural relic, who must adjust to the complexities and nuances of modern society. While the character of Captain America remains a fixture in the comic books, the culmination of the recent MCU 'Infinity Saga' (*Endgame*, 2019), fi-



nally enables Steve Rogers to revisit his past and reclaim the decades that he sacrificed. In many ways, this represents the completion of his hero's journey. He has overcome the ordeal, travelled back in time to place the powerful Infinity stones in their rightful places as a final act of duty, and has returned to his first and only love Peggy Carter with renewed life experience and wisdom. It is perhaps the only moment where he has allowed himself to act upon his true desire, while retaining his heroic integrity by ensuring that others are not put in danger.

The Superhero genre is replete with heroes who have self-sacrificed aspects of themselves to help others. For example, Norrin Radd is transformed into the cosmic Silver Surfer in order to save his home planet (Zenn-La) from the ravenous 'planet-eater' Galactus. The genesis of a Superhero character's story arc often establishes a similar self-sacrifice that defines the values attributed to that character. Those familiar with the story of the Silver Surfer are constantly reminded of his self-sacrifice via his transformation from the human-like Norrin Radd to the cosmic Silver Surfer that rides his board through the universe, attempting to find planets suitable to temporarily sustain his Master's hunger. Such comic book characters may evolve and change over time, but their genesis is typically one of self-sacrifice in order to protect others from harm.

### **Self-sacrifice, reboot culture and death of the hero**

Superhero comics, occasionally undergo cyclical periods where entire universes are formed, re-purposed and reset. In many ways the entire pantheon of the comic book publishing house is forced to participate in a collective hero's journey that sweeps every character into an ordeal that is so profound that their very universe is placed into peril. For example, Marvel and DC regularly 'reboot' their titles via grandiose story arcs such as DC's *Flashpoint* (2011) and Marvel's *Secret Wars* (2015), in a bid to boost sales and position their 'house' in a new creative direction. These limited series typically build to a crescendo of potential threat and danger to myriad superhero characters, before finally coalescing into a new Marvel or DC 'Universe'. The resulting reboot often reimagines popular characters, or incorporates versions of existing superheroes from other universes, such as Miles Morales joining Peter Parker as another version of Spiderman. The following extract from Marvel.com ex-

emphasizes their attempt to represent and attract a more diverse readership by adding new characters like Miles Morales to their line up,

As a young Afro-Latino from the Spanish-speaking side of Brooklyn, Morales is a great reminder of just how much personal struggle is involved with taking on universe-crossing threats like Galactus. He's a person of color who not only has to balance his Super Hero identity, but his cultural and social identities as well [...] Like the real New York, Marvel's New York sees Miles Morales interacting with peoples of multiple cultures, and even has him slip into the occasional Spanish when just living his everyday life (Valdez 2019).

Issues of colour, language and diversity of cultures are prevalent in the statement above, which clearly indicate a willingness to imagine and embrace new forms of narrative within the Superhero genre. The resulting stories attempt to merge a sense of contemporary culture and social identity alongside more conventional Superhero tropes. The story of Miles Morales and other publishing 'reboots' arguably represent another form of Campbell's hero's journey, as a 'special event' narrative that culminates in the death of the hero (or Universe), and their subsequent rebirth into a new era that reflects contemporary society.

In addition to the death of a comic book universe, individual comic book characters such as Superman have died and subsequently been reborn on several occasions over the years. Their resulting rebirth may arise from the publishing house seeking to reboot the character for a contemporary audience, or it may simply be a way to temporarily generate increased sales for a particular comic book title, as noted by Jeffrey Brown, 'For example, the sense that the recent *Death of Superman* issue is "hot" encourages investors to purchase at least one if not multiple copies of the issue on the speculation that the monetary value of such a landmark issue will increase dramatically' (Brown 2005, 309). Brown's statement focuses purely on the monetary value of the issue rather than its impact on the fans, or if the subsequent reboot of Superman affects his character traits, powers, and surrounding cast of characters. This continual cycle of death and rebirth appears to remain a steadfast component

of the Superhero genre, and typically draws inspiration from the self-sacrifice of a heroic figure to save the lives of others. Therefore, as readers we are left with the question: What does their sacrifice mean when the hero and even their universe is reborn at a later date?

Writing in response to the 2011 death of the Fantastic Four's Human Torch, Bob Gough explains, "all that matters for fans who have been through so many of these dramatic demises [...] is the story. Is it a good death? Do the other characters react well? [...] What are the collateral consequences [...]? How about the resurrection? Is it handled well? (Bahlmann 2016, 47).

The previous statement suggests that these characters are expendable (albeit temporarily), if it serves the purpose of the character's story arc, and it has been handled sympathetically by the artist and writer. The issues of collateral consequences and resurrection also allude to the commonality of such events, as readers expect a considered approach to the death of the character in that particular universe and their seemingly inevitable rebirth at a later date.

The alternative to this never-ending cycle of death and rebirth, is of course a scenario in which the hero fades into old age and loses the ability to help others. Few comic book authors and artists have dared to broach the subject of old age afflicting the hero, with the exception of creatives such as Alan Moore (*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* 1999) and Frank Miller (*The Dark Knight Returns* 1986). More recently the Marvel trope of 'Old Man' limited comic book series, such as the post-apocalyptic world featuring Wolverine in *Old Man Logan* (2008), have added futuristic dystopias that elderly heroes must face, so that even in their advancing years the theme of self-sacrifice is still ingrained in their character's DNA. The very concept of the elderly comic book hero is one that the French artist Gilles Barbier explores in his sculptural installation *L'Hospice (Nursing Home, 2002)*. The installation depicts Superman relying on a white zimmer frame for support, a frail Hulk sits meekly in a wheelchair and a bald Mr Fantastic is unable to control his flaccid limbs as he passively reads a book. The heroic cycle of death and vital rebirth has been replaced by a disturbing scene that depicts stagnation and ennui, which are negative aspects of life. The ageing bodies

on display are at odds with the familiar iconography of the heroes costumes that symbolize youth, strength and vitality. Fortunate then for the heroes, that these subversive titles and artworks are not the prevalent narrative and visual aesthetic in the Superhero genre.

### **Self-sacrifice and ‘permadeath’**

As the ongoing dominance of the cyclical narrative prevails in the Superhero genre, it is therefore quite rare for a comic book character to achieve a death that remains (currently) permanent. One such example can be witnessed in the anti-hero Walter Kovacs (Rorschach), who stands firm to his beliefs and is quickly obliterated by Dr Manhattan in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen* (1986). Kovacs is very much cast in the mold of the anti-hero, as his troubled childhood and propensity for extreme violence cast him as a misfit in society. It could be argued that Kovacs does not belong, even in the fringes of the heroic tradition. The shifting nature of his latex mask is an unsettling reminder of the myriad forms of depravity and evil that the unhinged Kovacs sees in the world, and his revulsion of the events leading up to his death leaves him with few options. His tragic self-sacrifice shields humanity from the knowledge that the interdimensional ‘psychic squid’ that has killed half of the population of New York, is an artificial monster created by Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias). His final act transforms the ruthless Kovacs into a sympathetic character willing to sacrifice his life for the ‘greater good’ of the planet.

While the printed comic relies upon the rebirth of many of its most popular characters in order to revitalise sales and indeed the aesthetic and approach to storytelling, the MCU currently relies upon actors who age over time and lose some of the vitality of youth. Robert Downey Jr’s depiction of Tony Stark in *Iron Man* (2008), reveals a ruthless and driven futurist at the height of his hubris. He revels in his mastery over advanced weapons and the lifestyle that they afford him, without a thought for the collateral damage that they inflict on innocents. Couch the arrogance of youth within Tony Stark in the first movie with that of the man that returns from deep space at the beginning of *Endgame* (2019), and we see a broken individual, haunted by failure and the death of the teenage Peter Parker who regarded him almost like a father figure. His hero’s journey appears to have come to an end, not only at the hand

of Thanos, but also by the broken promise of the Avengers to protect humanity. By the end of the movie Tony Stark sacrifices himself by using the Infinity Gauntlet in order to save countless lives, not least the recently resurrected Peter Parker, as well as his wife and young daughter. The older Stark atones for his younger digressions, as he embraces a final act of self-sacrifice. He has completed his hero's journey, but more importantly he must sacrifice himself in order to retain the mantle of hero before time robs him of his vitality and purpose.

### Conclusion

The role of the hero in literature and comic book culture is one that continues to proliferate throughout society. The Superhero genre relies upon the self-sacrifice of myriad characters in order to give them purpose and to protect their fictional communities and universe in general. Many of these iconic figures have established a strong presence in popular culture, but as emerging forms of competing entertainment such as videogames have gained popularity, there is an increasing push towards characters that represent the growing diversity of race and cultures within the United States in particular. Heroes do not depend upon gender or physical attributes to resonate throughout the ages, but they do rely upon new adaptations and narrative cycles to keep them alive and relevant for current readers, moviegoers, and younger generations. The ongoing cyclical death and rebirth of Superhero characters and entire universes suggests that publishers and the entertainment industry in general are continually refining and remodelling the notion of the hero in contemporary culture. The example of Miles Morales as an alternative Spiderman, suggests that the Superhero industry is willing to diversify in order to gain new readers, while hopefully retaining their loyal readers and film fans.

But what of the Superhero who dies only to be reborn several issues later? What does their sacrifice mean when death seems to hold no power over them? This author posits that while comic book and film fans mourn the passing of a hero in some act of self-sacrifice, there is solace in knowing that their hero's journey has come to an end. There is a sense of fulfillment; of a life lived with real purpose and a vitality that is preserved in the death of the character involved. However, it should be noted that with the almost in-

evitable rebirth of that character, there is a real danger that their legacy and iconic status may be diminished for the foreseeable future. This is especially pertinent if comic book fans and moviegoers sense that the Superhero has been sacrificed simply for news story headlines and a temporary boost in sales figures, without due consideration to the meaning and aftermath of their loss, and subsequent 'reboot' within the narrative structures of the comic book or cinematic universes.

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## What is so super about motion comics?

Exploring the potential of motion comics about comic book superheroes and heroes of popular culture

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### Abstract

This article explores motion comics through theoretical review of relevant academic work and unique analysis of three sampled motion comic cases. The article intends to illuminate and answer the research question: What is the quality of superhero motion comics if we consider both the medium aesthetics and the opportunities which digital technology provide for a cultural practice exploring new or other ways to tell stories about superheroes and characters in popular culture. We explore this question through an analysis of a series of past and contemporary motion comic productions, pro-



duced both from professional media producers, as well as fan-made motion comic productions\*.

**Keywords** Comic book superheroes, motion comics, animation, adaptation, transmedia storytelling

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## Introduction

The evolution of the comic book has been described as visual narrative material dating back centuries (McCloud 1994, Magnussen & Christiansen 2000, Kukkonen 2013, Babic 2014, Mazur & Danner 2014). However, comics took shape with the technological developments in print and distribution, and later remediated into the digital, interactive and online forms (Kukkonen 2013). The remediations never proved any threat to the printed comic book form, because the new digital and interactive forms supported new ways of distributing the comic book content. However, what changed was the expectations of the readers and the possibilities of the fans to re-create and re-affirm the universe of comic books.

Motion comics have existed for more than four decades, but, are still broadly seen as an emerging phenomenon (Smith 2011, 2015). While some have proposed broad inclusive definitions of the genre as a hybrid format (e.g. Smith 2011), others have argued that the genre is ill-definable due to its multiple dimensions of e.g. motion types, levels of interactivity, narrative structures, sound modalities, and production overlaps with film and animation (Morton 2015). Furthermore, the genre has been criticized for lacking the spatiotemporal reflection of the reader, due to the addition of sound and movement synchronization mediating the traditional comics gaps between the multiframe pictures (Groensteen 2013). Thus, the current discourse has focused mainly on either discussing whether motion comics can be attributed the label of “comics”, as well as mapping how the different aesthetics of the genre can be described and combined.

In the 1960s the Marvel Group produced a series of superhero “cartoons” portraying the most popular Marvel characters (Coogan 2006, Patton 2018). Two decades before Marvel Group released the Saturday morning cartoons portraying their comic book superheroes as motion comics, the DC comic book character *Superman* was portrayed in Max Fleischer’s cartoon animated version (1941-43). Compared to Fleischer’s animated work the Marvel motion comics represented a clear lowering of visual and temporal quality. Only the voice acting in the Marvel motion comics gave sufficient quality to merit the attention of the comic book fan. The movement of the body parts of the characters were crude and comical. But this was exactly the point for Marvel Comics Group. The motion comics were supposed to be a cheap way of showcasing and remediating the comic books to increase sales and product loyalty.



Figure 1: Marvel Group’s 1966s version of the comic book superhero Captain America as motion comic.

Comic book superheroes have been constantly present across media formats since the 1940s, and the popularity (Arnaudo 2013, Bahlmann 2016, Beaty & Woo 2016) of comic book superheroes may explain the emergence of the superhero motion comics (Smith 2011). Paraphrasing comic book scholar Peter Coogan’s conclusion: Com-

ic book superheroes are the “golden boys” of big cross media franchise productions. Now, the recent version of motion comics featuring comic book superheroes emerged in the 2000s, and was marked with the production and release of *Watchmen: Motion Comic* with the marketing caption: *The Graphic Novel comes to Life page by page* (Gibbons & Moore 2008). These productions of motion comics represent a merge or link between new technological developments (the digitization of comic book content) and business opportunities resulting in a viable bi-product, that for the franchises of both the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the DC Cinematic Universe (DCU). The business aspect of motion comics is not part of the research interest of this article. The interest in motion comics follows the lines of the critical academic studies sparked by *Watchmen: The Motion Comic* (Morton 2015, 2017). The critique (motion comic is a “bastard” medium) was aimed not at the business ambitions, but rather the formal attributes of motion comics and the medium aesthetic incompatibility of comic books, animation and movies (Morton 2017).

The research motivation behind this study in motion comics emerged from a scholarly interest in animation, comic books and superhero origin stories (Vistisen 2016, Andersen 2017). A brief look at the market or online presence of superhero motion comics reveals quite a diversity in the quality of the materials shared on social media platforms such as YouTube. The academic interest in comic book superheroes across media and platforms can be explained by drawing attention to the substantial scholarly work on the subject (e.g. Coogan 2006, Romagnoli & Pagnucci 2013, Duncan et al. 2015).

This article approaches superhero motion comics from a perspective of media studies. The article intends to answer the research question: What is the quality of hero-themed motion comics if we consider both the medium aesthetics and the opportunities which digital technology provides for a cultural practice exploring new or other ways to tell stories about superheroes and characters in popular culture.

We review the positions within the current academic discourse of motion comics, and propose a framing based on the contexts motion comics can rise from and be utilized within. We present an analysis of three cases of motion comics. We seek to show the range of cultural productions motion comics might arise from - from the professional adaption to the fan-made sub-creations. The final claim of the

paper is that the interest for creating motion comics will persist because of the need for retelling the stories of comic book superheroes in both semi-fi and low-fi fan versions comparable to the audio book, and the micro-level contribution to the ongoing sub creations of the franchises through a co-creative transmedia storytelling.

### Theoretical elements of motion comics

As mentioned, the link between comic book superheroes and motion comics is strong (Coogan 2006, Smith 2011, Morton 2015). This may be the case partially because comic book superheroes currently are dominantly present in both the conventional comic book market and the broader popular culture (the cinematic superhero franchises, Comic Con fan culture). It needs to be noted, that Oriental comic book culture (e.g. anime, manga) may very well represent an equally strong source of influence, just as motion comics enacting *My Little Pony* is also part of the big picture of motion comic. But that question, the diversity of the motion comics themes and characters viewed globally, is a matter for another study. But it is fair to claim that comic book production is a global and culturally diverse business (Romagnoli & Pagnucci 2013, Beaty & Woo 2016).

The study of motion comics is a relatively small area of academic inquiry within the field of comic books/graphic novels studies and cinema/movies studies. Research into the academic publications on the subject reveals that two scholars are uniquely accredited to the keywords *motion comics*: Craig Smith and Drew Morton (Smith 2011, Smith 2015, Morton 2015, 2017). Craig Smith claims that motion comics is a *hybrid media format* that is neither comic book, animation, nor cartoon. Defining the object of study in this way is a non-definition as Drew Morton points out (Morton 2015). Both Smith and Morton list different sets of format qualities in order to define motion comics as a multimodal medium. It is clear that Smith and Morton in their work are not in any direct way considering an audience or fan approach to the phenomenon. However, Smith acknowledges: "that for the time being, the motion comic exemplifies aspects of adaptation that some readers of the original hypotext cannot readily accept." [Smith 2011, 359]

Further, Smith envisions that the professional production of motion comics still can be considered a genuine innovation within this particular field of popular culture, and thus opening for a possible

understanding of motion comics as something created by fans as well. Smith states, “(...) *motion comics is part of a strategy to cross-pollinate new and existing comic book content with moving image culture via screen-based devices and digital disruption channels (...).*” (Smith 2015, 4)

In the academic discussion between Smith and Morton, the latter acknowledges the claim, that motion comics *is* a new medium, but with the caveat that motion comics have both risen, fallen and failed due to an inherent inconsistency in the formal medium qualities, the relative low contribution to the overall business value creation, and poor reception among comic book and animation professionals (Morton 2015, Morton 2017). Both scholars provide sets of formal qualities or a formal taxonomy of motion comics aesthetics. The two sets of format qualities are presented visually below, but for further presentation of the singular format qualities we refer to Smith and Morton’s work.

Following Smith’s conceptualization of motion comics, it becomes possible to include conventional comic book features such as panels, genres and spatial depth. Smith adds to this list other fea-

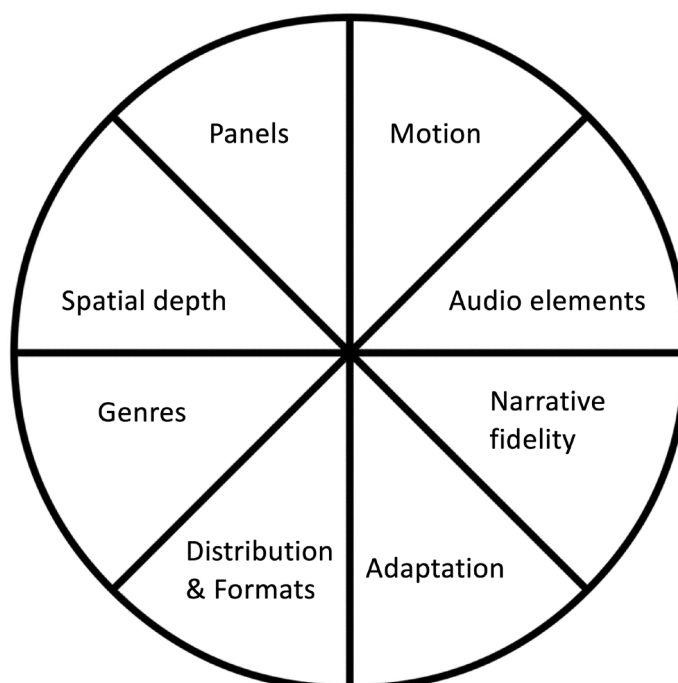


Figure 2: Model of the motion comic aesthetics, Craig Smith, 2015 (authors’ visualization).

tures related to animation and movies: Motion, audio elements, adaptation, narrative fidelity, distribution and formats. These formal qualities are not to be understood in any hierarchical or sequential structure, and the reason Smith himself begins his analysis of motion comics aesthetics with “comic book panels” can be explained by his comic book study background, which becomes clear from the beginning of Smith’s analysis: “A motion comic appropriates original comic book narrative and artwork as the primary source of visual material for its creation.” (Smith 2015, 4)

Smith does not give any explanation for the interrelatedness of these aesthetic elements. One question could be whether the mode of adaptation determines how panels, motion, narrative and audio elements are created. Or if motion comics are not a remediation how does the comic book qualities translate into a hybrid format?

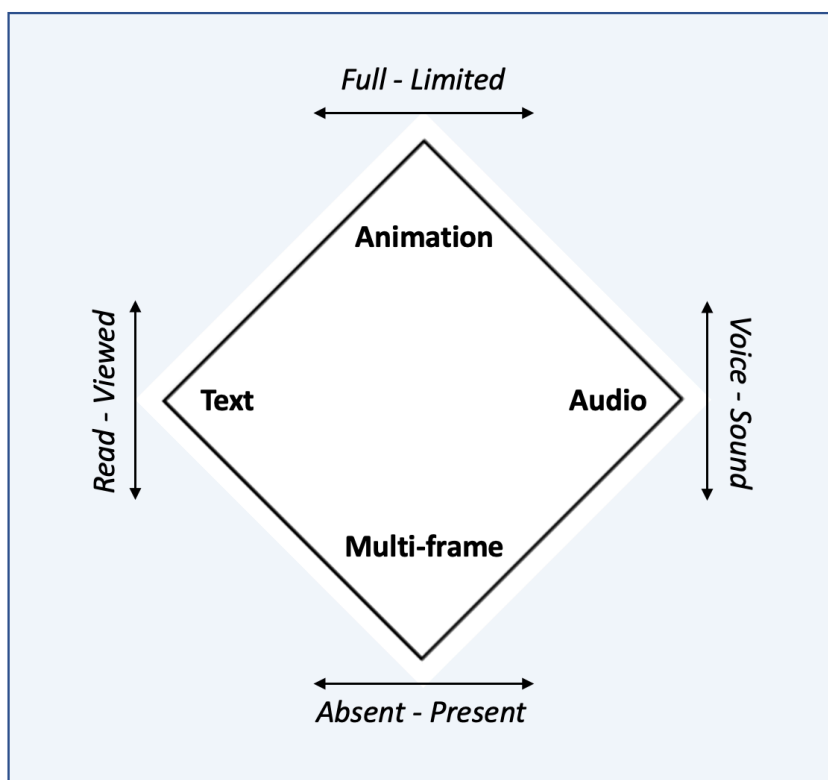


Figure 3: Formal Taxonomy of motion comics based on Drew Morton (authors’ visualization).

This question of interrelatedness of the motion comic aesthetic elements is worth an independent study. In contrast to Smith's motion comics aesthetics, Morton argues that adaptation cannot be a defining quality of the medium (Morton 2015, 349). Morton proposes his own taxonomy of motion comics by pointing to four medium specific elements, and further gives these elements a range of degree.

Two points can be made of Morton's contribution to a formal taxonomy of motion comics. The first is that the narrative element is absent. Maybe because it is taken for granted (e.g. nothing can be a comic without a story), or because it is considered to be part of the text element. One possibility could be to put narrative (or "narrative fidelity" with Smith) in the center of the model. This would make the narrative key to the choices made in the production of motion comics. The second point has to do with understanding the part of the audience (and the fans), mentioned by Smith. Once again, the text element can be considered to include different modes of reception. Morton distinguishes between reading and viewing which in itself points to modes of reception.

Our review of the theoretical elements provides a rearticulation of the problem of cultural quality of motion comics. Are the qualities inherent in the "text", or in the reception and use of the text, or somewhere in-between. This article will provide an answer to this particular question. However, as a methodological reflection the following analysis will draw on the framework in a pragmatic and an eclectic manner, in order to answer the initial research question in focus.

### **Analysis: Signs of motion comic aesthetics and its significance**

For this article three motion comics have been selected. They are about popular comic book superheroes and from a popular video game detective series. The samples have been selected represent both official-professional production and an unofficial-fan productions.

We frame the analysis through the use of motion comic aesthetics and formal taxonomies from Morton and Smith, and links this to the notion of "bardic function" borrowed from cultural studies while finally seeing this through the larger picture of cultural production seen in e.g. fandom creations.

Title	<i>Spider-Woman</i>	<i>Spider Man Marvel Knights</i>	<i>Max Payne</i>
Producer	Marvel Animation	Thwip Studios (fan made production)	Remedy Games / Rock Star Studios
Time	00:50:00 (5 episodes)	00:42:29	01:02:17 (total)
Date	19.08.2018	02.07.2015	23.06.2001
Views (20.11.19)	19,329	87,511	32,476 (Youtube version)
URL	<a href="https://youtu.be/Cat335zknik">https://youtu.be/Cat335zknik</a>	<a href="https://youtu.be/YB6iitw-SNY">https://youtu.be/YB6iitw-SNY</a>	<a href="https://youtu.be/Nda_fiChSho">https://youtu.be/Nda_fiChSho</a>

Figure 4: Overview of the motion comic case samples.

**Case 1: *The Noir-Feel and the Noir-Sound of Spider-Woman’s mission***

*Spider-Woman: Agent of S.W.O.R.D* (2010) is an official Marvel Motion Comic adaptation from the comic book version “Spider-Woman” Vol. 4, issues 1-7 (2009-10). This is the type of motion comics both Smith and Morton focus on in their work; Professional franchise productions. The motion comic consists of five 10 minutes episodes, and for the purpose of this article material from the first episode will be used.

The narrative fidelity is high, even though all the frames and panels are not used in the motion comic version. It is the story of the superhero Spider-Woman / Jessica Drew, trying to find herself after her participation in battle with the superhero group Avengers. In the first episode of the motion comic Jessica Drew is approached and recruited by the secret counter terrorism organization S.W.O.R.D. This hurls Jessica into conflict with foes both human and alien.

Several features of Smith’s motion comic aesthetics are present in this case sample. It is based on a single screen movie format, no panels. The motion comic uses both panning (spinning) and smooth shifts between the single screen frames. The coloring is similar to that of the comic book version. It is dark, blurry and very moodfully. The shadows in the screen frame play an important part of the vis-



ual aesthetic and the perception of spatial depth. In this case no instance of moving mouth, eyes, or heads is found.

The two crucial motion comic elements in this case is the use of motion and audio. In the sequence the camera pans through a shot of the facade of the hotel where Jessica is staying. In the background a ferris wheel is spinning. Throughout this episode it rains, cars and some characters are moving ever so slightly. The movements are in no way abrupt creating a sense of natural flow, even in situations with action.



Figure 5: The first shot in Spider-Woman: Agent of S.W.O.R.D.

Motions are also employed in frames where Jessica reflects, thinks or dreams. In this case, a blank space in the background is changed with a sliding movement revealing a new image (see Figure 6). This kind of motion is different because something is replaced in the screen view. At the end of the first episode we find another example of this quick switch of images. In a hotel Jessica dozes off (the screen shot closes and turns black, like closing your eyes). Immediately after a series of images flashes by like a nightmare, and it ends abruptly with a screen image of Jessica with open eyes. In itself no figure or object have moved, but the rapid shift of images framed by the image of Jessica's face with closed eyes and then eyes wide open creates the sensation of motion. A further example of motion is found in a sequence where Jessica is browsing through her mission on the device she received from the S.W.O.R.D agent.

This sequence is by the way unique, since it is not part of the comic book version.



Figure 6: Jessica Drew remembers with unease her participation in battle.

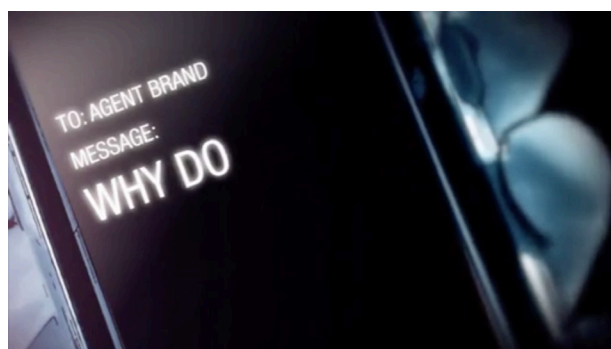


Figure 7: Jessica is texting Agent Brand after browsing through the mission file.

Finally, a 10 seconds scene depicts Jessica trying to fall asleep in her Mardripor hotel room. She closes her eyes, mimicked by a centering fadeout is a scene, and then a series of screen images flashes by,



Figure 8: Still images from the scene where Jessica experiences a nightmare, not a contemplation as in the comic book.

ending with the image of Jessica with eyes wide open. The speed and the background sound suggest that Jessica just had a nightmare. In the comic book version this “nightmare” is depicted as a “detective wall” with photos and notes posted on an ordinary apartment wall. The same images are there but displayed as a single frame more denotes a reflection, at least anything but a nightmare.

We claim that this is an example of a unique motion comic aesthetic. To borrow Morton’s taxonomy this element in the motion comic invites a viewing not a reading.

All the visual elements are accompanied by a professional track of both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Apart from a few examples of text displays like Jessica is reading something on her device, no speech balloons or text boxes are used. The narration is carried forward by the audio elements. The use of natural sounds (e.g. the sound of rain, a honking car, a helicopter rotor, a fired gun) and the use of both Jessica’s inner dialogue and the dialogue between the characters make the viewing a different experience than reading the comic book.

### **Case 2: *Having fun with Spider-Man and foes***

This motion comic is an amateur adaptation of Mark Millar’s comic book story arc “Marvel Knights: Spider-Man” (22 issues, first 12 used). The adaptation represents a middle level of narrative fidelity, but the flow of the story is the same as in the comic book version. The genre is all Marvel superheroes, but in contrast to *Spider-Woman’s case* it is clear that production is non-professional. It is a case of amateur or fan production, and at a genre level this is significant in understanding the cultural value and continuation of motion comics as an independent cultural form.

*Spider-Man Marvel Knights* uses single screen images with less smooth changes between the frames. The motion comic uses neither speech bubbles nor text boxes. These narrative elements are substituted by audio speech and the partial use of sounds. The use of spatial depth is absent as all the images are directly cut from the comic book material. This means that depth is achieved only by the direct use of the comic book materials. However, some use of background motion gives the impression of depth.

Motion as an aesthetic quality is used in *Spider-Man* in a limited number of ways. The first is dragging or swiping cutout elements



Figure 9: Spider-Man cut-out figures are dragged across the frame.

across the single screen image (Figure 9). In this dual illustration the figures are dragged from left to right in a static background. As a sign of the quality notice that Spider-Man's webbing is not attached to anything. There are many examples of cutout elements being dragged across the screen image (e.g. characters falling out of windows). Simple animation is employed in scenes like the example with Black Cat (Figure 10, static move of the thug's hand) and The Vulture (Figure 11, static moving background).

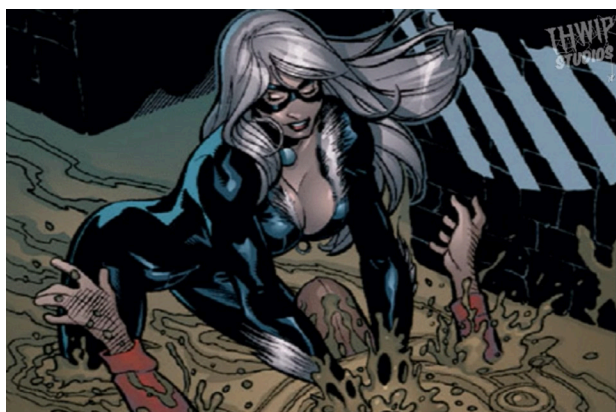


Figure 10: The hands of Black Cat's unfortunate thug are moving slightly.



Figure 11: The background is moving circular making the supervillain Vulture fly.

In *Spider-Man* the voice-over and voice acting replaces speech bubbles and text boxes. In this case the use of background music is also employed. However, the use of these audio elements is all somewhat off key. The background music and diegetic sounds are either too low or too high. And the voice-acting, though evidently performed by different persons, vary in the same “grotesque” way. This indicates that the voice-acting has been recorded and distributed individually based on the technical facilities of the individual creator, and finally has been edited at one station. This mode of production has created a “mashup” bricolage that has not adjusted and adapted the sound level to a more coherent performance. We claim that this quality “flaw” is defining for the fan production and motion comics creativity. In all likelihood, this *Spider-man* motion comic is not intended to be distributed for revenue but for sharing amongst fellow fans. And in this type of circulation sharing itself is the capital value.

### **Case 3: *Telling a noir video game story through motion comics***

Our third case is the video game *Max Payne* (2001), a game set in a classic noir crime story, which uses motion comics instead of cinematics to convey the specific noir discourse in a way the third person shooting gameplay itself could not. To achieve both fast-paced action, and deep noir storytelling, *Max Payne*’s motion comic cutscenes relieves the gameplay sequences with storytelling, constantly reaffirming the story discourse despite the action gameplays diverging from it.

The *Max Payne* motion comic cutscenes are not an adaption or abridged from a previous original comic, cartoon or otherwise, but is created solely for the game itself as an artist choice of delivering the noir feel to an otherwise action packed third person shooting game. However, the panels faithfully adapt the traditional comic page structure, though gradually animating each frame as the story progresses, thus moving towards the audience anticipation of films. A very simple spatial manipulation is present in the motion comic cutscenes. The spatial manipulation diverges in a limited degree from static comics at times, as seen when the aesthetics are manipulated to mimic emotional elements of the story. This is seen e.g. when *Max Payne* wakes up after being knocked down, in which the

subsequent frames are blurry and gains clarity in sync with Max Payne's own narration getting clearer again. The overall spatiality, however, remains flat in 2D with no separated layers or other manipulations of the scene in each frame. Along the same lines, the user is constantly able to press a 'stop' button in the interface, enabling you to opt out of all motion elements and through interactivity 'stop' the motion comic, presenting all frames, and just read it as a regular comic with no motion, sounds etc.



Figure 12: The motion comic cutscenes of Max Payne (2001), with panels emerging synchronous with e.g. the voice acting (top) and diegetic sounds of the beating with a baseball bat (bottom).

The cutscenes use a full spectrum of audio elements, from a dark instrumental music score, diegetic sound effects, and full voice acting told both from Max Payne's inner dialogue as well as interac-

tions between actors in the scenes. Auditory cues are being reused throughout the entire game cutscenes, enabling the player to know when a motion comic cutscene relieves the gameplay, and what kind of scene will be presented. As such, the music cues are different depending on something being a motion comic cutscene introducing a new level or being an intermezzo inside the level.

Finally, what about the actual motion elements in the motion comic cutscenes? In Smith's (2015) categorization all motion comics must *pr. definition* have some degree of motion present in the frames. However, in *Max Payne*, there is little to none actual motion present in the individual frames, begging the question if the cutscenes can actually be regarded as a motion comic? Following Smith's (2015) definition of motion comics as illustrated artwork situated in a digital environment we might argue that even though there is no motion present, there is definitely a temporal form through other modalities (sound, voice, music and gameplay). As such, it is the non-visual temporal forms, which create the sense of motion in *Max Payne* - as when *Max Payne* gets hit by a baseball bat (figure 14), where the reveal of the (static) visual frame is carefully timed with the 'krakk!' sounds of the bat hitting him. This evokes a reaction in the audience to render their own mental rendition of the motion without the need for any more than what can visually be described as an animatic with absolute limited animated motion. In a sense, the sound animates the still image through the synchronization of the visual cut with the audio effect. As such, a limited animation use is still working as a motion comic due to the full spectrum of other modalities in use. While being an 'extra' element to the main game, the cutscenes can only be fully perceived alongside the game. On the other hand, the game's noir feel cannot easily be perceived without the motion comic cutscenes. As such, the bardic function of motion comics gives the game a form of communication which, at the time of the game production, would be hard to convey through gameplay agency or through traditional in-game cinematic cutscenes.

### **Discussion: Motion comic production archetypes**

The case samples have demonstrated the diversity or range of motion comic features among three examples which differ in not only form, but also in context of production and scope. The *Marvel Mo-*

tion Comic production shows the established professional mode of production for motion comics, easily applicable through the lens of the formal frameworks of Morton and Smith both in terms of filmic and aesthetic dimensions, as well as the narrative fidelities and modes of distribution. However, the two latter examples of the fan made Marvel Knight, and the game integrated cutscene motion comics of Max Payne, complicate the analysis - not through the formal qualities of structure, narrative or aesthetics, but how their mode of production affects how the formal qualities have come to be.

One key element or observation is the difference in the degree of professionalism in the production of the motion comics. From our analysis we argue a series of archetypal modes of production can be synthesized, which each point towards different types of cultural value in the motion comic:

- As an adaption or an appropriation of existing media formats or modalities (most commonly traditional comics)
- As a relieving format for another media format or modality in the same production to express something the primary format cannot (e.g. a game like Max Payne)
- As an add-on in the context of multiple media productions in a transmedia storytelling
- As a fanmade subcreation, leveraging both adaption and add-on productions

Related to the transmedial archetype is the fourth, and final, which describes a mode of production in which the motion comic is not defined as being produced for the fan audience, but as a fan production itself. Though it is evidently hard to propose a strict formal definition and limitation of what a motion comic is, the contributions from Morton (2015) and Smith (2011, 2015) do point towards another way of addressing the importance of the 'form' of motion comics, compared to other types of mediated production due to its use of adaptations and reinterpretations of existing visual forms. Through their predominant use of limited animation techniques echoing early pre-Disney animation complexity, motion comics are a comparably easier format to master for the producing users - what scholars such as Sandvik (2018) would label these *prousers* in fan-



doms. In other words, the production complexity, and the media literacy required to produce motion comics sits in a fidelity sweet spot, comparable to how fandoms also remix video clips and graphics from tentpole mediums (e.g. Jensen & Vistisen 2013). While it could be argued that traditional comics (fanmade or professionally made) could accomplish the same storytelling for the *prouser* there is an important point to be made about what the addition of temporal information adds. While the traditional comic book format presents the viewer with the totality of the page frames, the motion comics enables the *prousers* to interpret the pacing and rhythm of the events when transforming into a motion comics sequence (Vistisen 2016, Sandvik 2018). Perhaps most importantly, the addition of temporal information to the comics enables the formation of an audience anticipation and suspensefulness vastly different from that of the comic books page overview, and thus leaning more towards the expressive potential of cartoon movies. Thus, the format is *prousers* friendly enough to enable a broad scope of co-creative consumers to reach an acceptable temporal fidelity when adapting, reinterpreting or remediating a story within their respective fandoms. As such, motion comics become a vehicle for the cultural production of fans to engage with the tentpoles of their fandom, and create not just content, but also form.

At this point in our study of motion comics it seems to indicate that fan made motion comics are taking over the scene of transmedia storytelling adaptations.

### **Endgame? Conclusion and new orientations for motion comics?**

Our study of motion comics has provided insight into the emerging academic framework. The study has pointed to different ways of conceptualizing a motion comic aesthetic or taxonomy. Our contribution to this academic discussion is the critique that formal medium aesthetics cannot explain why motion comics are still part of global popular comic culture and fandom. Further we have listed archetypal modes production indicating that fans are taking over the motion comics game. The size, circulation and support of this motion comics game is a matter for an independent study. This insight into fan production is in no way new to other areas of popular media culture, but in the case of motion comics it points to the ne-

cessity to reframe the study of motion comics in order to understand the quality and significance of this wave. The turn convergence is not news to scholars of fans and fan creativity, but in relation to studies of motion comics the cultural element - the bardic function - can provide an explanation why fans pick up where the businesses left motion comics and continue the cultural production and reproduction of low to middle fidelity motion comics about their favorite comic book superhero or other franchise heroes.

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## Precarious Lines

Heroism and hyper-capability 90s *Nightwing* comics<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article discusses the run of the comics series *Nightwing* (Dixon/McDaniel 1996-2009) with particular focus on how hegemonic masculinity and bodily capability are linked and tied to a normative concept of heroism. Through the visual style of the comics and the use of antagonists, the comics rehabilitate the excess and precariousness of the hero, Nightwing, by contrasting him to more extreme forms of masculinity. Although the comics show Nightwing's privilege and ability to be precarious and a source of anxiety and heightened visual tension, the subversive potentials remain unrealized. By relegating excessive, disabled, and working-class forms of masculinity to queered and villainized characters, the comics uphold a nuanced but ultimately normative heroic ideal.

**Keywords:** superheroes, masculinity, able-bodiedness, comics, orientation

"He's gotta be strong, and he's gotta be fast, and he's gotta be larger than life," sings Bonnie Tyler in what is perhaps the most commonly referenced song in superhero scholarship, "Holding out for a

Hero" from 1984. The lyrics epitomize many of the traits associated with the comic book superhero since Superman appeared in 1938: strength, speed, superhuman presence and, not in the least, identified by the masculine pronoun. Growing diversity in superhero scholarship, as well as the heightened degree of exchange between comics studies and queer theory, has led to an ever-increasing number of analyses of the constructions of gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, class, and race in superhero comics.<sup>2</sup> Despite the male-dominated makeup of both superheroes in general and their imagined readership<sup>3</sup>, masculinity remains under-analyzed, apart from a few key contributions: Jeffrey A. Brown's studies on the intersections of masculinity and blackness in comic books, with a particular focus on Milestone Comics' superhero titles (Brown 1999; 2001); work on the classical male superheroes, Superman, Batman, and Spiderman by scholars such as Edward Avery-Natale and Robert and Julie Voelker-Morris (Avery-Natale 2013; Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris 2014); as well as a study by Mervi Miettinen which investigates masculinity in the context of the oft-claimed "deconstruction of the superhero" in the late 1980s (Miettinen 2014). A recent anthology, edited by Sean Parson and J.L. Schatz, is the first collected edition to explore hegemonic masculinity in superhero media (Parson and Schatz 2019). A subset of studies, including work by Brown and Avery-Natale as well as Anna F. Peppard (Peppard 2018), pays attention to the excessive and extravagant 'beefcake' style of superhero comics in 1990s and the turn towards increasingly hyper-gendered bodies (see Beaty and Woo 2016, 79–80 for a more detailed discussion of the 90s Beefcake aesthetic and politics). While Peppard focuses on the superheroes created and drawn by artists Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, and Rob Liefeld, I wish to turn my attention to another superhero who came into his own in the 90s: DC comics' *Nightwing*, as written by Chuck Dixon and drawn mainly by Scott McDaniel. In doing so, I will be paying special attention to how *Nightwing's* masculinity is constructed and contested, as well as how it intersects with negotiations of able-bodiedness and class. The emergence of masculinity in relation to able-bodiedness and precarity in the comics reveals how heroism is coded through performances of gender and embodiment.

At surface level, the Dixon/McDaniel *Nightwing* run fits with both the aesthetic and the politics of its historical context. As schol-

ars such as Brown, Carolyn Cocca, and Ramzi Fawaz have argued, the changes in the mainstream U.S. comics market in the 1990s, which traded newsstand sales for direct market and led to a homogenization of 'the comics reader,' resulted in an extreme gender binary prevalent in mainstream comics (Cocca 2016; Fawaz 2016; Brown 1999). Nightwing and his supporting cast adhere to stereotypical and exaggerated depictions of hypermasculinity and hypersexualized femininity. I would argue, however, that close reading reveals an awareness within the comics that the foundations for this gender binary are precarious and hinged upon an impossible standard of bodily capability. The vulnerability of Nightwing, which occasionally comes to the fore through the narration and changes in panel structure, presents the hypermasculine body as pure surface with no underlying stable 'truth.' The genre conventions and idealized bodies uphold an impossible standard that goes beyond exaggerated physiques. Read against the grain, the comics tell a story of the entangled natures of masculinity and able-bodiedness and the extremes to which one must go to keep up the charade, as well as how non-normativity is ultimately relegated to the bodies of villains.

### **Nightwing: the manliest hero of them all?**

Nightwing, alias Richard 'Dick' Grayson, first appeared in comics as Batman's sidekick Robin in 1940. As the character aged and new characters took his place as Robin, Grayson became known as the superhero Nightwing, working both alongside Batman, in various superhero teams including the Teen Titans, and on his own. The 1996-2009 run, published by DC Comics and spearheaded by writer Chuck Dixon, was the first solo run for Nightwing (outside a couple of mini-series published in 1995). The main storyline details Nightwing's coming-of-age as an independent superhero, beginning with his move from Gotham to the neighboring town of Blüdhaven, rife with organized crime and outside the unofficial jurisdiction of Batman. In *Nightwing #1*, Grayson loses his exceptionally long ponytail when it is cut off during a fight (Dixon et al. 2014, 117). Apart from the obvious castration metaphor, this begins Nightwing's journey of 'growing up', donning not only a more practical haircut but one which makes him look more like Batman. His costume becomes darker, more streamlined, and slightly less

garish than the tri-colored Robin outfit. And while he still retains the quippy, sarcastic wit associated with the character, the story-arcs and associated villains of the *Nightwing* comics are as dark and fantastical as those in the *Batman* comics. The increasing similarities between protege and mentor are touched upon explicitly in the comics, as Nightwing admits to expecting to 'take over' as Batman in the future. Batman becomes a symbol of successful masculinity, presented as physically capable and able-bodied, as well as extremely wealthy, which both protects his civilian identity through class privilege and enables him to perform vigilantism aided by sophisticated and expensive gadgets.

The interdependency of gender and able-bodiedness are at the forefront of the *Nightwing* comics. Dick Grayson so closely approximates Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's definition of the Normate, which appears in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997):

[there is] only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports. (Erving Goffman, quoted in Garland-Thomson 1997, 8)

Apart from being unwed, childless, and lacking college education (for which he makes up by actively dating women and joining the police academy), Nightwing fits this description to a tee. He also fits the stereotypical idea of the superhero as a white, adult, able-bodied, hetero- (and, indeed, hyper-) sexual man in possession of above-average fighting and acrobatic skills (See e.g. Coogan 2006; Brown 1999). Nightwing should feel right at home on the pages of a superhero comic, especially one drawn in the beefcake style. However, I would argue that a closer look at the comics reveals a great deal of 'body trouble' attached to and surrounding the figure of Nightwing, destabilizing his normative status and revealing the contingency of superheroic masculinity.

"Classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man," claims Brown in his study of masculinity in comic books (Brown 1999, 26). Brown understands masculinity as

emblemized in the male-coded body, in particular the muscular body, which represents “male superiority” and which “clearly marks an individual as a bearer of masculine power” (Brown 1999, 27). Brown here indirectly identifies what might, with R.W. Connell’s term, be named the hegemonic masculinity of superhero comics in the 1990s. In a 2005 reexamination of the use and development of the term “hegemonic masculinity,” co-authored by Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, it is emphasized that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed and ahistorical set of traits. Rather, it is the expression of the dominant forms of masculinity at a given spatiotemporal location, which is continuously negotiated by those attempting to inhabit a masculine-coded body and/or social position (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 841, 854)the authors defend the underlying concept of masculinity, which in most research use is neither reified nor essentialist. However, the criticism of trait models of gender and rigid typologies is sound. The treatment of the subject in research on hegemonic masculinity can be improved with the aid of recent psychological models, although limits to discursive flexibility must be recognized. The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not equate to a model of social reproduction; we need to recognize social struggles in which subordinated masculinities influence dominant forms. Finally, the authors review what has been confirmed from early formulations (the idea of multiple masculinities, the concept of hegemony, and the emphasis on change. Like the Normate, hegemonic masculinity is a model or construct, which no one person necessarily inhabits but around which men, in particular, orient themselves. Brown’s equation of the male body and masculinity is not uncommon in superhero scholarship; Avery-Natale’s study of superhero embodiment identifies Superman as not only an archetype of superheroes, but an archetype of masculinity (Avery-Natale 2013, 72). He further argues that, despite the superhuman and transgressive capabilities of the superhuman body, the gender binary seems to be the one thing superheroes are unable to transcend (Avery-Natale 2013, 95). This argument dovetails with Brown’s identification of the male-coded superhero body as a site of masculinity, exemplified through exaggerated musculature and traits usually coded as masculine: strength, hardness, and impenetrability.



Nightwing's hypermasculinity is tied to his status as hyper-capable. His body, which is drawn in great detail by McDaniel and is the visual focus on almost every page of the comic, becomes a site for exploring the fraught links between gender and able-bodiedness. Cynthia Barounis, discussing Batman, has argued that the visual aesthetic of impenetrability in the superhero genre works to link heteromascularity with able-bodiedness and heightened capability (Barounis 2013, 316). But although Barounis sees little to no queer potential in such depictions, I find that the *Nightwing* comics repeatedly underline the contingent nature of the hero's impenetrable body and capability in both narrative and visuals. Should he lose his extraordinary abilities, we are led to understand, his entire identity would come crashing down around him. According to Peppard, a strictly binary gender difference is upheld and pushed to extremes in 90s comic book style. Peppard reads the "excessive superhero bodies" as expressing the "fears and desires that underpinned the image-focused culture of the 1980s and 1990s," citing bodybuilding, fitness culture, and other image-focused body trends during the era (Peppard 2018, 3). Following this argument, the excessive style of drawing prevalent in superhero comics can be seen as the continuation of the deconstructive trend in superhero comics in the 80s, which according to Miettinen is a reaction to the same "crisis in masculinity" with regards to masculine embodiment in the U.S. Miettinen further suggests, pointing to the example of the character Rorschach in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-87), that the 'deconstructive' move of pushing masculinity to the extreme also leads to an embodiment of those extreme ideals, which might hold appeal not just as parody, but as an affirmation (Miettinen 2014, 107). Further, according to Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris;

Mainstream superhero narratives are significant to explore in terms of gender because of the ways in which representations of seemingly one-dimensional muscle-bound males tap into complex multi-dimensional social archetypes and socio-political themes. (Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris 2014, 101)

In other words, depictions of superheroic masculinity as excessive embodiment has both normative and subversive potentials. Keeping this in mind, I will now look to how hegemonic masculine ideals prevalent to 90s superhero comics are negotiated through both style and narrative in the Dixon/McDaniels *Nightwing* run and how these are entangled with heroism.

### **Masculinity on the edge**

For decades, the superhero genre has placed male superheroes in a complicated social space somewhere between the extremely heteronormative ideals of gender, which amongst other things results in the hypersexualized images of women, and a homosocial collective practice of donning tight spandex suits and fighting crime in all-male (or mostly male) teams. Nightwing's narrative explores this contingent masculinity. This becomes particularly apparent in *Nightwing* #25, titled "The Boys," which depicts Nightwing and the then-current Robin on a training expedition atop a moving freight train, voluntarily blindfolded. The story serves as a break from the overall story-arc, as the pair encounter no recurring villains and make no progress in open investigations. During their discussions of the risks inherent in vigilante work, Nightwing and Robin touch upon the subject of Jason Todd, another former Robin who was beaten to death by the villain The Joker. The sequence highlights the emotional vulnerability of the two heroes by using low, wide panels showing close-ups of their faces (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 275–77).

This is a departure from the mostly vertical panel structure utilized throughout the *Nightwing* comics, which is especially suited for showing Nightwing's high-speed acrobatics. Full-page panels and highly stylized pages of three side-by-side tall panels are frequently utilized throughout the run, often showing Nightwing in the technique known as simultaneous figuration (Groensteen 2013, 24; CF Gravett 2008), in which a character is depicted multiple times across the page to illustrate high-speed movement (See e.g. Dixon et al. 2014, 139).

This characterizes Nightwing as a dynamic character who is almost always in motion, directing the eyes of the reader as they move across the pages. He is the master of his own narrative, at least when unchallenged. The standard panel shape in the Dixon/



Figure 1. "Excerpt from Dixon et al 2016, 276.  
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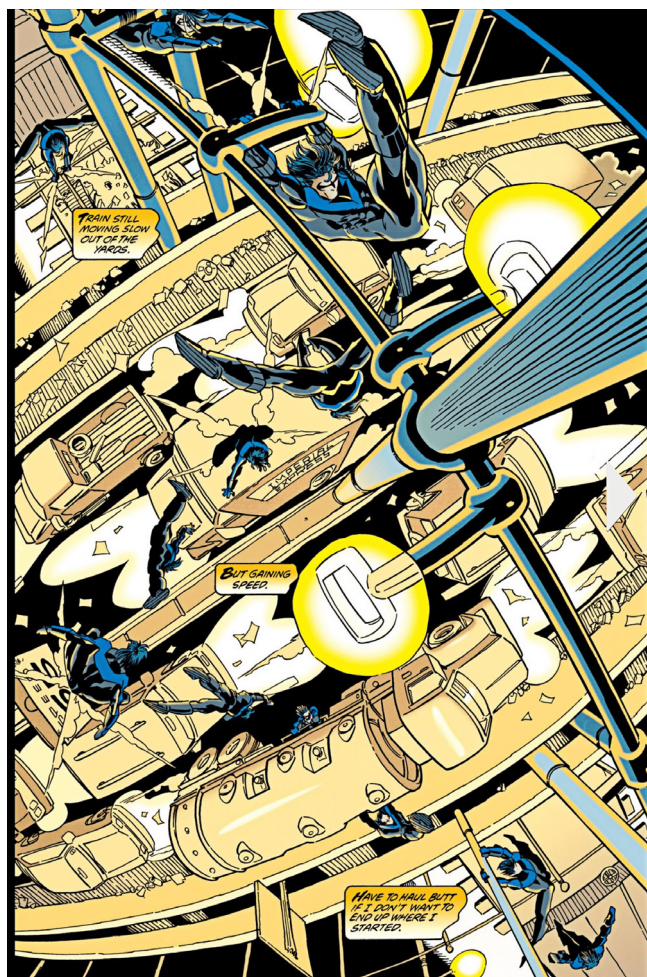


Figure 2. "Excerpt from Dixon et al 2014, 139.  
© DC Comics "

McDaniel run, which can only be described as phallic, frames Nightwing literally as an 'upstanding guy', pushing the narrative forward at breakneck speed. In contrast, the horizontal panel orientation which dominates "The Boys" makes it possible for both heroes to be depicted at once, next to each other, but also brings the reader closer to them emotionally, taking part in their relationship. The intimacy of the discussion leads to Robin confessing to feeling fearful when working as a superhero, unlike Batman and Nightwing, whom he believes to be fearless (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 276). Nightwing explains that the fearlessness is a façade and that

he often gets scared, “Mostly of **failing**. Sometimes of **dying**.” (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 277). But just as the sequence threatens to completely dismantle the tough and capable heroes, the team of would-be robbers shows up, giving our heroes the chance to prove their physical capability. The tension between depictions of heroism and depictions of vulnerability becomes clear through the changing panel structure and the discussions of heroism. On the one hand, vulnerability and precarity is shown to be part and parcel of being a superhero. On the other, the visual separation of emotional vulnerability and bodily hyper-capability in different panel styles suggests an incompatibility of the two.

Earlier in the sequence, Nightwing and Robin are forced to leap off the train when a group of teenagers throw rocks onto it. Nightwing only just manages to cling onto the carriage and a shocked Robin wants to take off his blindfold and stop the training. “NO! You can’t change the rules when the game is rough.” (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 275).

Nightwing exclaims, to which Robin protests that they are putting themselves in mortal danger purely for training. Nightwing retorts that they put their lives on the line constantly when on duty, “So what’s so different about **tonight**?” (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 275). Being Nightwing always means living on the edge, no matter the circumstances. It becomes clear to the reader, in this sequence and throughout the run, that Nightwing’s hyper-capability and superheroic identity are so closely linked that one cannot exist without the other. This is further emphasized by the fact that we rarely see Grayson out of costume – and in the rare cases that we do, he is posed dynamically and usually on the move or fighting. Nightwing is always in movement and testing his limits, which is reflected in the visuals, linking his embodied masculine heterosexuality with able-bodiedness and hyper-capability.

Garland-Thomson argues that able-bodied people shy away from disabled bodies because they are a visual reminder of our own precarious able-bodiedness. Highlighting the unstable nature of normative embodiment can thus destabilize the permanence usually ascribed to gender and sexual identity, as they are linked to able-bodiedness (Garland-Thomson 1997, 14, 37). Peppard makes a similar argument in her reading of hyper-masculine superheroes:

the combined rigidity and ultra-detailed partible-ness of Lee's male superheroes advertises their (super)heroic ability to remain hard, self-contained, and ready for action amid and despite the seemingly impossible challenge of holding together hundreds of tiny, individually articulated parts that one wrong movement – or one moment of softness – might otherwise topple, or at the very least rearrange. (Peppard 2018, 10)

The *Nightwing* comics foreground this cultural anxiety by making Nightwing embody it: his superhero identity is explicitly shown and described as dependent on his capability, which is neither guaranteed nor stable, but which nevertheless scaffolds his entire being. The extreme depiction of his body visualizes the extreme nature of his identity, while at the same time highlighting the shaky ground on which his identity is erected.

### **Villainous masculinity**

Having explored how Nightwing's masculinity is explored and challenged through the visual style of the comics, it has become apparent that the comics themselves offer a critique of the mutually reinforcing standards of able-bodiedness and masculinity. This critique becomes more apparent, but is also complicated, when considering the antagonists offered as contrasts to Nightwing throughout the run. I turn now to two examples, Torque and Nite-Wing, to illustrate how their embodiments of disability and working-class youth, respectively, rehabilitate the hegemonic masculinity represented by Nightwing by disassociating it from 'bad' traits and linking it to heroism by contrasting it with the explicit villainy of the antagonists.

Nightwing encounters Torque in the very first issue as the corrupt police inspector Dudley 'Deadly' Soames. Soames is a traditional 'dirty cop', who both helps Nightwing and sells him out to über-villain Blockbuster (Dixon et al. 2014, 262). As Soames fails to eliminate Nightwing, Blockbuster attempts to murder Soames by applying his signature move: twisting the victim's head around 180 degrees. Miraculously, Soames survives this attempt on his life (Dixon et al. 2015, 75), and after treatment and extensive physical therapy returns as the villain Torque, whose head is permanently



Figure 3. "Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 186.  
© DC Comics"

fixed in a backwards position (Dixon, Beatty, et al. 2016, 76). Like his 'creator', Blockbuster, whose body is distorted to inhuman size and strength by advanced steroids, Torque inhabits a grotesque and impossible body. His entire identity is reoriented, literally and figuratively, by his new body; he takes the name 'Torque' after the force which rotates objects around their own axis, he leaves palindromic messages for his enemies, and frequently speaks in puns related to his disability. When identified as Soames by Nightwing, he replies, "That life's **behind** me now. / That's a bit o' **cripple** humor." (Dixon, Beatty, et al. 2016, 116). His wholesale embrace of this new and different form of embodiment is reflected in the page layouts, which increasingly feature Torque in circular panels, which have been a recurring feature throughout the run. These mimic the mirrors which Torque uses to navigate, connection the circular motif to him (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 186).

Although Torque and Nightwing may seem like opposites and are positioned antagonistically, their narratives mirror each other: as Soames leaves the police force to become the vigilante Torque, Nightwing joins the police academy to aid his vigilante

work. The trope of the villain as a 'dark mirror' of the superhero is a staple of the genre (Coogan 2006, 103), as is the framing of disability and/or disfigurement as leading to a villainous nature (Alaniz 2014, 88). Both tropes are utilized to make a point about the fate which, according to the logic of the comic, awaits someone irreversibly disabled by their exploits: villainy and disfigurement. Torque and Blockbuster both represent exaggerated and deformed versions of masculinity, which are coded as evil and linked to a failed performance of able-bodiedness. While the disability politics of the comic, which are in line with a long-standing tradition in the genre, are not exactly progressive, they do

hint at the dangers of hyper-masculinity and its entanglement with compulsory able-bodiedness by villainizing even more extreme forms than those embodied by Nightwing.

Another antagonist who mirrors Nightwing is Tad Ryerstad, a juvenile delinquent who is inspired to vigilantism by Nightwing, donning the moniker 'Nite-Wing' and employing ultra-violent street-style fighting along with very poor judgement (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 181).

As his name suggests, he is a 'discount version' of the main hero; working alone and without a mentor like Batman, jumping into fights with no premeditation or investigative work, accidentally assaulting innocent passers-by, and showing little to no empathy in his work. His outfit is homemade, and, unlike Nightwing, he has no specialized equipment or training to make up for his lack of superpowers. He is quickly established as a foil to Nightwing, who must rescue him on several occasions (e.g. in *Nightwing* #22) and is often credited with his blunders, as police and criminals alike mistake the two for each other.

Nite-Wings origin story, revealed in an appendix to the trade paperback *Nightwing Vol. 4: Love and Bullets*, contains thinly veiled references to Dr Fredric Wertham and the Comics Code controversy, setting up Tad as a young boy who flees a traumatic upbringing by reading violent comics, which in turn make him a sociopath with a distorted sense of reality (Dixon, Beatty, et al. 2016, 278). Unlike Nightwing, he has grown up poor and without the privilege of being taken in by a billionaire superhero who could act as a mentor. Nite-Wing is, essentially, Nightwing without the class privilege and is framed by the genre conventions as a ruthless antagonist. While the comic aligns the reader with Nightwing's perspective, making it hard to read Nite-Wing sympathetically, one can identify a critique in the framing of Nite-Wing as Nightwing's mirror. Read reparatively, Nite-Wings grossly caricatured past and blundering aggression can be understood as a comment on the role of class privilege in superheroics, where the well-to-do hero is trusted more than the do-it-yourself version. Both Nite-Wing and Torque, however, are marginalized by their choice to 'do evil', framed purely as a voluntary turn of events. The comics do not seriously comment on the privileges which allow Nightwing to inhabit a morally superior form of vigilantism, rather framing him as a self-made man

who comes up from nothing and chooses to do good. As long as 'evil' is safely contained in the bodies of Torque and Nite-Wing, our hero remains safe – and, indeed, heroic. The boundaries are muddled, however, by the repeated emphasis placed on Nightwing's similarities to these villains. He risks being 'tainted' by the darkness at every turn. Tying the circular panels to Torque and positioning Nite-Wing as a 'dark twin' infuses the narrative with the sense of precarity discussed above. The villains thus function as orientation devices in both narrative and visuals; at surface level, they safely locate non-normativity outside of the hero.

While rehabilitating Nightwing's privilege, Torque and Nite-Wing also function as guarantors for Nightwing's masculinity as respectable and mature. Not only is Nightwing's masculinity linked to his able-bodiedness and class, it is also linked to his heroism in contrast to the gendering of the villainous characters. In his study of comic book masculinity, Brown argues that the male superhero relies on the dual nature of both a strong, 'masculine' side – usually, the one wearing the costume – and a softer, 'feminine' side – usually, the 'civilian' identity. Comic book masculinity, Brown writes, "is ultimately premised on the *inclusion* of the devalued side." (Brown 1999, 32) In other words, Nightwing's vulnerability marks him, both in the visuals and in contrast to the antagonists, as more 'truly' masculine, not less. When Torque's status as able-bodied is taken from him, his stereotypical dirty-cop masculinity turns from cocky to murderous. His tendency towards evil is characterized in part through his attitude towards women, whom he deliberately endangers and/or kills to save his own skin. He threatens Blockbuster's elderly mother in an attempt to get the upper hand on the crime lord (Dixon et al. 2015, 69) and murders the woman doctor in charge of his rehabilitation (Dixon, Beatty, et al. 2016, 32). Similarly, Nite-Wing represents an immature and crass approach to 'saving the day and the girl', frequently assaulting innocent bystanders and lashing out against those who taunt him for his lack of finesse and class. Neither villain shows nuance or any sign of being in touch with any other version of masculinity than a hard-edged and ruthless reliance on physical strength and violence. Between them, Torque and Nite-Wing reveal Nightwing's masculinity to be entangled in able-bodied and class privilege, as well as how Nightwing's more vulnerable and less hard-edged masculinity, following



Brown's argument, is reinforced as hegemonic. In this, of course, its entanglement with other forms of privilege is essential.

### **Queering the beefcake**

Dixon and McDaniel never leave us in any doubt that Nightwing is as 'manly' as any traditional superhero. They do, however, stress that constantly living on the edge makes him vulnerable and means that he could lose his able-bodied and, by extension, masculine privilege at any point. Masculinity is expressed, visually and narratively, as an embodied experience of privilege, although of a fleeting kind. The spectacular nature of the hyper-masculine body can be read as reifying its dominance, but also as placing the superheroic male body in a position we usually think of as being inhabited by the feminine-coded body: that of the visual spectacle, the fetishized object, the body on display in suggestive poses. Peppard's work on the 90s visual style argues that the excessive way in which male bodies are depicted suggests "a new permeability of the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and/or between spectacular bodies that are ego ideals and spectacular bodies that are sexual objects." (Peppard 2018, 7). This move, in turn, can be read in several ways: as visual dominance and a power play AND as a subversive moment which renders the hypermasculine body as bleeding into stereotypically 'feminized' territory. While a classic gender binary would identify invulnerability as masculine and vulnerability as feminine, as well as the active/dynamic as masculine and the passive as feminine, the hyper-masculinity represented by Nightwing is linked to vulnerability. By re-coding vulnerability and precarity as masculine, the comics turn the binary on its head, at the same time re-coding masculinity as vulnerable and precarious. The gender binary, while not deconstructed completely, is reworked. It is important, however, to keep in mind the ubiquity of this extreme visual style at the time of publication. Nightwing may appear, particularly to readers today, to be absurdly hyper-gendered. But in the context of the comics, however much they explore the vulnerability of this body, he is positioned as a heroic, rather than grotesque, embodiment of masculine strength and prowess.

The deconstructing move performed on the comics pages is countered in the use of villainous characters, whose function seems primarily to be to rehabilitate Nightwing's masculinity and norma-

tive status by embodying disability, working-class crassness, and misogynistic masculinity, all of which are entangled in the villainous 'other'. Villains like Blockbuster and Torque are framed as even more absurdly exaggerated embodiments of able-bodied masculinity, pushed to extremes that become disabling. And failed vigilantes such as Nite-Wing embody the lack of class privilege and maturity which Nightwing has transcended by growing up with a billionaire mentor/father figure. By framing Torque and Nite-Wing as more extreme, more queer, and more crass than Nightwing, the comics normalize a hero whose masculinity and capability would otherwise be understood as extreme.

The vilification of the antagonists hints that Nightwing's overcompensatory embodiment and identity are in danger of sliding into villainy. While it becomes clear that his privilege protects him, his precarity can thus also be read as a warning about excessive masculinity and the dangers of being at the extremes of the gender binary. The superhero body is still an idealized body and the superhero genre still frames this body and its exploits as wish-fulfillment, but the parodic extremity of the visual style and the careful attempts to rehabilitate masculinity as more than just having a lot of muscle mass also frame the superhero body and genre as a warning against one-dimensional, invulnerable masculinity.

The 90s 'beefcake' style may have been the norm at the time Dixon and McDaniel began their run on *Nightwing*, but read today, it is almost impossible to overlook the queer potential of the grotesque art style and the clichéd plots. *Nightwing* establishes an almost picture-perfect Normate, only to test and question him at every turn, even making him muse aloud about how his entire being would collapse should his body fail him. And while, at surface level, the *Nightwing* comics present a hypermasculine superhero who fits perfectly with the extreme aesthetics and conservative gender politics of the time, close reading reveals a more nuanced negotiation and rehabilitation of extreme masculinity – even though the extremes are ultimately vilified. The queer potential is thus never truly realized but exists as messy negotiations on the visually busy pages. Heroism, nevertheless, remains linked to a form of masculinity, which – when shored up by privileges of able-bodiedness and wealth – can encompass vulnerability.

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### Endnotes

- 1 The author wishes to thank Dr. Michael Nebeling Petersen for his help and advice on this article.
- 2 See e.g. the 2018 special issue of *American Literature*, "Queer About Comics", as well as monographs by Nama (2011), Alaniz (2014), Cocca (2016), and Fawaz (2016), to name a few.
- 3 I am yet to identify a piece of superhero scholarship which imagines a male-led superhero title to be aimed primarily at girls or women.

## Faderen som helt i computerspil

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### Abstract

In the last few years, a new type of hero has emerged in computer games: the father, who has sole responsibility for a child. In this article, three action-adventure computer games are analyzed to explore how fatherhood extends the notion of masculinity and the concept of heroism. Interestingly, these computer games seem to soften and extend existing notion of masculinity. In addition, the games do not appear to create the kind of backlash as other attempts to create inclusive and representative characters in relation to different genders and sexualities.

**Keywords:** Fatherhood, masculinity, videogames, inclusivity, identity

## Indledning

I denne artikel undersøges tre udvalgte computerspil i forhold til den faderfigur, der udgør en af protagonisterne i de valgte spil. Hovedvægten af analysen lægges på maskulinitetsopfattelsen i de tre spil. Computerspil bliver ofte set som domineret af vold, hegemonisk maskulinitet samt mangel på empati og følelser. Som analysen viser, kan præsentationen af de tre fædre i de valgte computerspil ses som et paradigmeskift, hvor nye narrativer giver mulighed for at undersøge og arbejde med mere intime konflikter og problemstillinger. Ligeledes giver dette mulige paradigmeskift anledning til at overveje, hvordan computerspil kunne udvikles til at være mere inkluderende og repræsentative i forhold til nye helteopfattelser, kvindelige spillere og LGBT+ fællesskaberne. Mens dette perspektiv ikke uddybes yderligere i det følgende, vil det dog være en underliggende pointe i forhold til analyserne og kommende undersøgelser.

## De tre computerspil

Heltens rejse, som beskrevet af Vogler (2007), tager sit udgangspunkt i Joseph Campbells omstridte værk *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Blandt andet kritiseres Campbell for sin tilgang til heltefiguren som hegemonisk maskulin og se passive kvinder som belønning for udført heltedåd (Murdock, 1990; Frisk, 2019).

De såkaldte playable characters (PCs) som findes i typiske action-adventure spil (eksempelvis som *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*; *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*; *Assassin's Creed*; *Halo*) lever ofte op til denne snævre beskrivelse for helten, som findes hos Campbell og Vogler.

I 2013 udgiver firmaet Naughty Dog spillet *The Last of Us* og sætter dermed en nyudvikling af heltefiguren i denne spilgenre i gang. Joel, som er spillerens PC, er far til Sarah, som dør i begyndelsen af spillet. I løbet af spillet overtager Joel ansvaret for en anden pige, Ellie. Karakteren Joel udvikler sig i løbet af spillet fra at være den typiske hårdsående, følelseskolde helt til at blive som en far for Ellie. Spillerne oplever en stærkere emotionel tilknytning til både Joel og Ellie, samtidig med at spillerne begynder at reflektere over, hvad det vil sige at være far (Cruea, 2018). 2015 udkommer *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, afslutningen på den succesfulde *The Witcher* computerspilserie, udviklet af CD Project på baggrund af Sapkowskis *The Witcher* bogserien (Sapkowski, 2019). I denne ud-

gave følger vi Geralt af Rivia, der sammen med sin adoptiv-datter Ciri skal redde verden. Endelig er spillet *God of War 4*, udgivet af Sony Interactive Entertainment i 2018, endnu et eksempel på et spil, som har en fader i hovedrollen. Her skal Kratos vejlede og oplære sin søn Atreus.

Faderskabet bliver italesat på forskellig måde. Således er der i *The Last of Us* nærmest tale om en adoption af Ellie, mens *God of War* undersøger forholdet mellem en guddommelig far og dennes søn, som er halvgud, og endelige *The Witcher 3*, hvor forholdet mellem faderen og dennes datter Ciri er omdrejningspunktet.

De tre spil hører alle til action-adventure genren og spilles fra tredje persons perspektiv. De er konsolspil, dog findes *Witcher 3* også til pc'en. I sammenhæng med denne artikel kaldes spillene for computerspil. Spillene har været en klar salgssucces: *The Last of Us* har siden 2013 solgt 17 millioner eksemplarer for både Playstation 3 og 4 (Sarkar, 2018); *Witcher 3* har alene solgt 20 millioner eksemplarer på tværs af forskellige konsoller og pc'en siden 2015, hvor hele *Witcher* serien sammenlagt har solgt 40 millioner eksemplarer per juni 2019 (Haider, 2019); *God of War 4* har siden 2018 solgt 10 millioner eksemplarer udelukkende til Playstation 4 (Locke, 2019).

For at undersøge engagementet med spillene, blev en række søgninger gennemført på google.com. Søgeordene var henholdsvis 'spillets navn youtube' og 'faderens navn barnets navn spillets navn youtube'. Søgningerne skal kun ses som et lille udsnit af måder, spillerne kan engagere sig med spillene, men selv med dette begrænsede udgangspunkt kan det ses, at de tre valgte spil langt

Spil	Navn + Youtube søgning	Far + barn + navn + Youtube søgning
Uncharted 4	17.300.000 hits	-
The Last of Us	6.680.000.000 hits	267.000 hits
The Witcher 3	46.500.000 hits	114.000 hits
God of War 4	229.000.000 hits	122.000 hits

Tabel 1. Oversigt over engagement med de tre computerspil. Uncharted 4 er med som det mest solgte action-adventure Playstation 4 spil ifølge Wikipedia. Søgningerne foretaget 19. november 2019.



overgår Playstation 4 spillet *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, som ifølge Wikipedia er det mest solgte Playstation 4 spil per 19. november 2019 (Wikipedia, 2019).

Mens en del af forklaringen kan være, at *The Last of Us* er det ældste spil på listen, kan det dog ikke forklare *God of War 4*, som er det yngste spil og stadig overgår *Uncharted 4*.

### Maskulinitet og faderskab

Som Mark Cruea (2018) gør opmærksom på i sin analyse af spillernes tolkning og forhold til faderfiguren i *The Last of Us*, så er interessen for faderfigurer i computerspil i sin vorden. Dette til trods for, at flere spil allerede har brugt faderfiguren for at give deres karakterer yderligere dybde i forhold til de maskuline heltetyper, der findes i computerspil (Cruea, 2018:93).

Opfattelsen af den mandlige helt er i computerspil, ligesom i film, tæt forbundet med den hegemoniske maskulinitetsopfattelse (Connell, 1987). Den hegemoniske maskulinitetsopfattelse understøtter ideen om, at manden har en naturgiven magt over kvinden og børnene. Dette kommer især til udtryk i diskursen om den gamle mand eller patriarken, som defineres gennem autoritet, kropsstyrke, aggressivitet, konkurrence og vold. Meyer og Milestone (2012) har derudover påvist den såkaldt nye mand, også kaldet metroseksuel, som er mode- og sundhedsbevidst. Den nye mand ser sig selv som omsorgsfuld og med sympati for feminismen. Endelig er der den tredje diskurs, som tager udgangspunkt i 'the lad', som i Meyer og Milestones undersøgelse er blevet til 'the new lad'. Denne diskurs blander patriarkens macho træk sammen med den metroseksuelles fokus på mode og sundhed.

Mens disse tre diskurser er fremherskende i populærkulturen, sådan som vi kan finde den på film, tv og netop computerspil, har Anderson og McCormack dog påvist, at en ny, inkluderende maskulinitetsopfattelse er ved at udvikle sig (Anderson og McCormack, 2018). Den opfattelse tager udgangspunkt i, at maskulinitet ikke skal ses som hegemonisk. I stedet inkluderes feministiske og homoseksuelle træk i maskulinitetsopfattelsen, som på denne måde mister den klare adskillelse af mandlig versus kvindelig væremåde, som kan ses i den hegemoniske opfattelse.

I sin analyse af *The Last of Us* gør Cruea med god grund brug af den hegemoniske maskulinitetsopfattelse, siden Joel på mange må-

der opfylder den patriarkiske opfattelse af faderen som forsørger og øverste autoritet i familien (Pleck, 1998). Pleck udarbejder i 2010 en model for samspillet mellem faderskab og maskulinitet, som blandt andet tager udgangspunkt i, hvorvidt faderen er den biologiske far til barnet, i hvilken alder faderen blev far for første gang, samt hvor ofte han ser børnene. Dette sættes så i forhold til faderens maskulinitetsopfattelse (Pleck, 2010: 29). Mens Pleck undersøger, hvordan forælderrollen påvirker barnet, kan hans undersøgelse her sættes i forhold til de tre computerspil. Blandt andet henviser Pleck til Sandra Bems artikel om målingen af androgynisme ved at se på maskuline, feminine og neutrale træk i en given person. Bems artikel er fra 1974, men understøtter den hegemoniske maskulinitetsopfattelse, som stadig kan ses i populærkulturen.

Forandringerne i faderrollen skyldes ifølge Pleck, at forventningerne forandrer sig i det øjeblik, hvor faderen ikke længere er den eneste forsørger. Moderens mulighed for at have arbejde udenfor hjemmet medfører ligeledes en forventning om, at faderen engagerer sig yderligere i omsorgs- og husarbejdet (Griswold, 1993; Reinicke, 2013; Wahlström, 2010; Anderson og Magrath, 2019).

Den grundlæggende hypotese for denne artikel er således, at den hegemoniske maskulinitetsopfattelse i computerspil bliver forandret gennem brugen af faderfiguren i computerspil. Denne forandring og udvidelse af hovedkarakteren giver spillerne mulighed for en dybere empatisk forbindelse med karakterene i spillene, som igen kan lede til en forandring af maskulinitetsopfattelsen hos spilleren.

### **Analyse af de tre fædre**

Siden de tre valgte spil umiddelbart lægger sig indenfor den hegemoniske maskulinitetsopfattelse, vælges Bems kategorisering af tre kønsstereotyper som udgangspunkt for analysen af faderfigurene i de tre spil (Bem, 1974: 156). Bems kategorier blev udviklet til at måle androgynitet i mennesker, det vil sige, hvorvidt deres personlighed ligger indenfor det maskuline (m), feminine (f) eller det neutrale (n) spektrum.

Joel ( <i>The Last of Us</i> )	Geralt of Rivia ( <i>The Witcher 3</i> )	Kratos ( <i>God of War 4</i> )
Act as leader (m)	Athletic (m)	Aggressive (m)
Analytical (m)	Competitive (m)	Assertive (m)
Dominant (m)	Defends own belief (m)	Dominant (m)
Independent (m)	Independent (m)	Has leadership abilities (m)
Affectionate (f)	Individualistic (m)	Individualistic (m)
Gullible (f)	Self-sufficient (m)	Willing to take a stand (m)
Loyal (f)	Affectionate (f)	Affectionate (f)
Adaptable (n)	Compassionate (f)	Loyal (f)*
Moody (n)	Gentle (f)	Understanding (f)
Secretive (n)	Sympathetic (f)	Eager to soothe hurt feelings (f)*
Solemn (n)	Reliable (n)	Conceited (n)
Unpredictable (n)	Theatrical (n)	Moody (n)

Tabel 2: De tre fædre i forhold til Bems personlighedskategorier.

\*Gælder kun i forhold til Kratos' søn Atreus.

Bems oversigt kan virke gammeldags, især i forhold til feminismen og den inkluderende maskulinitet. De tre kategorier og deres elementer giver dog et billede af, at de tre fædre i disse spil ikke er entydig hegemonisk maskuline. De viser en dybde i karakteren, der går udover det maskuline og netop er istand til at inkorporere elementer fra både den feminine og neutrale kategori.

Dette bevirker, som Cruea allerede kunne påvise med *The Last of Us*, at spillerne får empati med karakterene. Både med Joel, som prøver at passe på Ellie, men også med Ellie selv. Her er der flere spillere, som giver udtryk for, at de opfatter Joel som dårlig far, fordi han ikke hjælper Ellie med at blive mere selvstændig og fastholder hende i et afhængighedsforhold til ham. Joel er et klassisk eksempel på det patriakalske familieoverhoved, som forsørger og drager omsorg ved at afværge farer mere end ved at understøtte en selvstændiggørelse af barnet (Cruea, 2018).

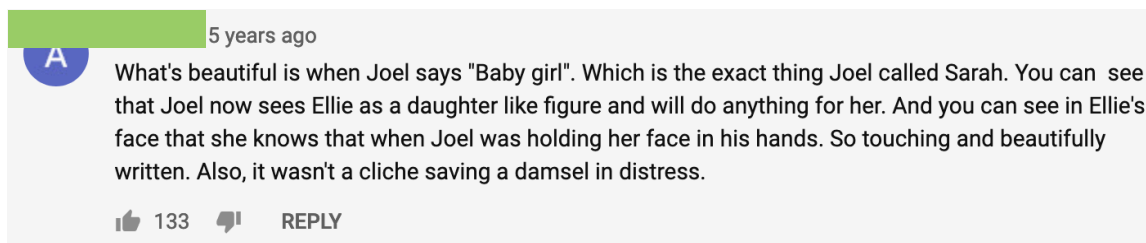
Dette står i modsætning til Kratos, som netop er mentor og vejleder for sin halvgude søn Atreus. Mens Kratos har en lang række

hypermaskuline elementer, blandt andet sit meget muskuløse udseende, de aggressive og dominante træk i sin personlighed, så er han ligeledes i stand til at vise følelser for sin søn og hjælpe ham videre i livet.

Mens der med Kratos og Atreus er tale om et fader-søn forhold, som kunne sættes ind i en hegemonisk maskulinitetsopfattelse, er Geralts forhold til sin datter Ciri præget af ikke bare stor følelsesmæssig involvering, men også ønsket om at oplære hende og hjælpe hende med at gennemføre sin mission som 'the chosen one'.

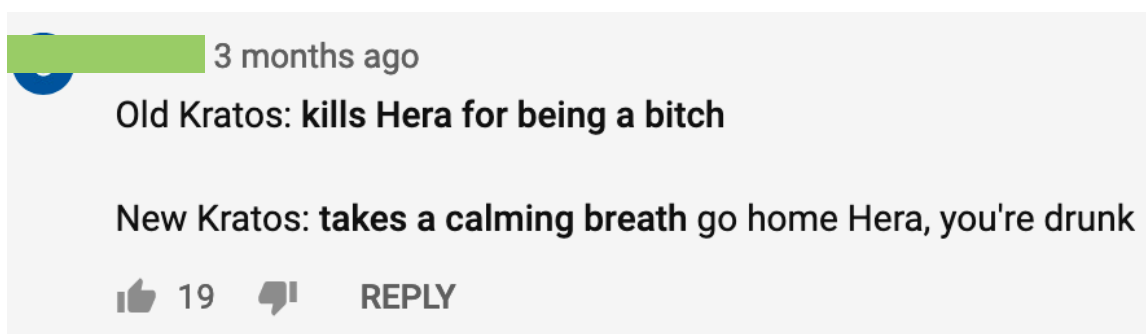
Denne forskel mellem fader-barn forholdet understreges yderligere i de valgmuligheder og konsekvenser, som spillene giver spilleren i forhold til fædre og børnene. Helt grundlæggende er spørgsmålet her, hvorvidt faderen har indflydelse på eller ligefrem kan diktere barnets valg. Her er Joel fra *The Last of Us* det ene ekstrem, idet han nærmest enerådigt bestemmer over Ellie og i slutningen af spillet ender med at snyde hende i forhold til hendes beslutning om at ofre sig selv til menneskehedens gode. Ellie er immun overfor den zombie-lidelse, der er ved at udslutte menneskeheden. En udvikling af vaccine ville dræbe Ellie og Joel kan ikke acceptere hendes valg efter allerede at have mistet sin datter i begyndelsen af apokalypsen.

Spillet har dermed en lineær fortælling, som gennem storytelling og karaktertegningen giver gode muligheder for indlevelse og empati fra spillerens side i forhold til faderen og Ellie. I modsætning til de andre to spil har spilleren her ikke mulighed for at kontrollere barnets handlinger. Kun en kort overgang har Ellie yderst begrænsede handlingsmuligheder, hvor Joel er bevidstløs. Dette bliver af spillere udpeget som et problem, fordi spillerne identificerer sig med Ellie og føler hendes begrænsninger som deres egne begrænsninger (Cruea, 2018). Hvor dyb denne identifikation og indlevning i Ellie finder sted, kan ligeledes ses af kommentarsporene til forskellige youtube klip fra spillets slutning (GameRevolution, 2013). Kommentatorerne giver overensstemmende udtryk for en dyb betagelse af Ellies redning, hvor flere påpeger, at hun faktisk redder sig selv (se figur 1). Selve det valgte videoklip har 510 likes mod 6 dislikes (28. februar 2020).



Figur 1. Kommentar til slutscenen i The Last of Us. Skærmbillede 19. november 2019.

*God of War 4* er ligeledes en lineær fortælling, hvor faderfiguren dog giver sønnen frihed i sine valg. I modsætning til Joel vejleder og uddanner Kratos sin søn. For eksempel kan Kratos godt skælde ud på Atreus og direkte fortælle ham, at det han gør, er forkert. Men samtidig træffer Atreus sine egne valg, blandt andet understreget af, at spilleren kan kontrollere Atreus' brug af bue og pil (zanar aesthetics, 2018). Se figur 2, hvor en kommentator forklarer forskellen på den gamle Kratos, som kan sidestilles med indbegrebet af den hegemoniske maskulinitets patriark eller gamle mand, og den nye Kratos, der viser nye sider af sin maskulinitet. Gamle Kratos er en reference til, hvordan han var i de første *God of War* spil, før hans udvikling i *God of War 4* fra 2018. Interessant i denne sammenhæng er den positive tilbagemelding fra andre brugere. Således har zanar aesthetics video 13.000 likes mod 369 dislikes (28. februar 2020).



Figur 2. Kommentar til Youtube klip fra God of War 4 med Kratos og Atreus. Skærmbillede 19. november 2019

I *Witcher 3* er udfaldet af spillet afhængig af en række valg, spilleren skal træffe som Geralt i forhold til dennes datter. Der er i alt 36 forskellige mulige slutninger, som dog kan inddeles i tre overordnede slutninger: Ciri dør; Ciri overlever og bliver selv til en witcher; Ciri

overlever og bliver kejserinde. Hver af disse slutninger er en konsekvens af en række valg, spilleren træffer som faderen Geralt:

Hvordan Ciri blev trøstet af Geralt under Blood on the Battlefield;

Om Geralt besøgte kejseren under Blood on the Battlefield;

Accepterede Geralt betaling fra kejseren for at have bragt Ciri til ham i Blood on the Battlefield;

Om Geralt ledsagede Ciri til et møde med Lodge of Sorceresses under Final Preparations;

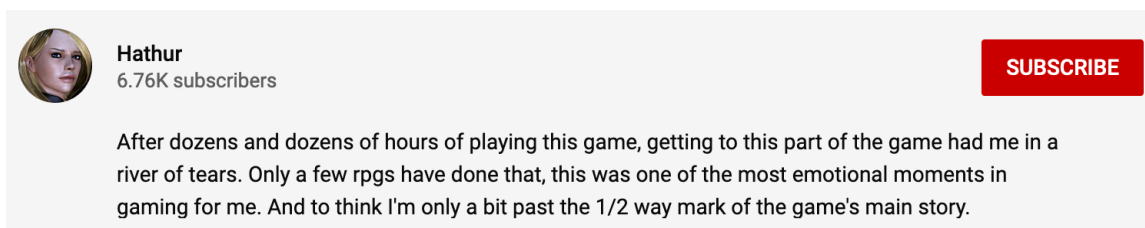
Hvordan Geralt reagerede på Ciri's temperament i The Child of the Elder Blood;

Om Geralt tog Ciri til Skjalls grav som et resultat af et valg i The Child of the Elder Blood;

Hvorvidt Geralt gennemfører en række af sidequests (Hillier, 2019).

Ciri overlever kun, hvis Geralt og dermed spilleren vælger de positive svar i flere af disse valg. Det vil sige, at spilleren skal træffe bevidste valg – også i forhold til, hvad der vil være et positivt valg for Ciri. Spilleren skal altså forholde sig til missionen, til Ciri og hendes udvikling, samt til det at være far og den rolle, han har i Ciris liv.

En af de mest emotionelle scener i *The Witcher* viser Geralt, der finder sin datter liggende død på bænke i en hytte (Hathur, 2015). Idet Geralt løfter hende op og omfavner hende, vækkes hun til live igen af det lys, som har fulgt Geralt gennem hele spillet. Som Hathur giver udtryk for i sin beskrivelse af youtube klippet (figur 3), har denne scene været den mest emotionelle nogensinde i forhold til såkaldte RPGs (roleplaying games).

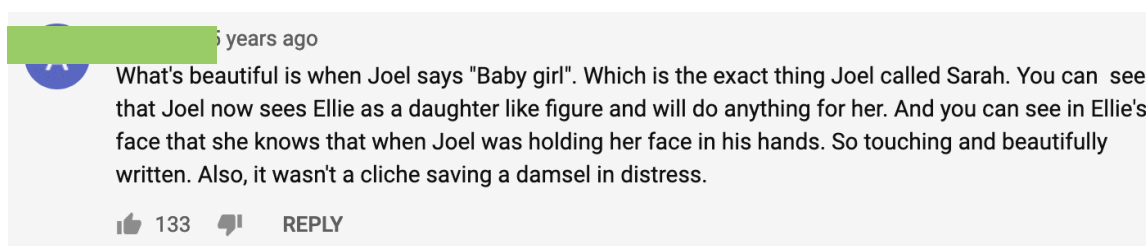


**Hathur**  
6.76K subscribers

After dozens and dozens of hours of playing this game, getting to this part of the game had me in a river of tears. Only a few rpgs have done that, this was one of the most emotional moments in gaming for me. And to think I'm only a bit past the 1/2 way mark of the game's main story.

Figur 3. Beskrivelse til Youtube klippet, hvor Geralt finder Ciri.  
Skærbillede 19. november 2019.

Kommentarsporet til dette youtube klip giver udtryk for den samme form for følelser. Igen kan det ses, at spillerne og brugerne ikke anser Geralts reaktion for forkert eller umandig, men tværtimod lever sig ind i hans sted (figur 4). Hathurs videoklip har 98 likes mod 1 dislike.



Figur 4. Kommentar til Youtube klippet, hvor Geralt finder Ciri.  
Skærbillede 19. november 2019.

### Konklusion

De tre valgte computerspil har faderfiguren til fælles. Derudover kan alle tre betegnes som succesfulde i forhold til salgstal og ligeledes engagementet med spillet i form af memes, youtube klip og kommentarspor.

Som analysen af de tre spil viser, er der sket et skred i opfattelsen af helten i spillene. Hvor de 'gamle' God of War spil helt klart havde en hegemonisk maskulin helt, der udelukkende var baseret på de maskuline elementer i Bems oversigt over personlighedskategorier, er den 'nye' Kratos anderledes dyb og kompleks i sin reaktion og sit samspil med sønnen Atreus. Ligeledes viser spillernes og brugernes reaktioner på *The Last of Us* og *The Witcher 3*, at spillenes komplekse figurer bliver modtaget positivt. Figurerne giver mulighed for identifikation og indlevelse, som igen giver mulighed for en bevidstgørelse af spillernes og brugernes egne handlinger.

Analysen viser tydeligt, at opfattelsen af den hegemoniske maskulinitet, som ellers er fremherskende i computerspil, med fordel kan ændres til inkluderende maskulinitet, endda med spillernes og brugernes accept.

Hvis denne tolkning er korrekt, så er det forfatterens opfattelse, at computerspil kunne vise vejen til at skabe forståelse for en udvikelse af maskulinitetsbegrebet til også at omfatte den inkluderende maskulinitet, feminismen samt en større forståelse for andre køn og

seksualiteter. Ikke kun ved at udvide repræsentationen, som kan give bagslag, med Gamergate som det værste eksempel (Massanari, 2017). Men ved netop at udvide opfattelsen af, hvad en helt, og især en maskulin helt, kan være. I denne artikel var udgangspunktet faderfiguren, som havde tre meget forskellige udtryk i de valgte spil. Det er spørgsmålet, hvordan andre udvidelser af den gængse helteopfattelse kunne være med til at skabe netop den repræsentation, som mangler i mainstream spil og populærkulturen.

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## “What you Remember is the Illusion”

### The Deluded Hero, New Mythology, and Nostalgia in *Final Fantasy VII*

**David Stevenson**

*is a PhD film graduate from Queen’s University, Belfast. His research interests focus on theorizing Japanese digital cultures and the application of interdisciplinary methodology and close reading to video games. Recently, David has been examining the relationship between game narratives, their aesthetics, and the industrial efforts that produce them.*

“No, not memories... a memory is something that is consciously recalled, right? That’s why sometimes it can be mistaken or wrong. It’s different from a memory locked deep in your heart.”

- Tifa Lockheart, *Final Fantasy VII*.

#### **Abstract**

Typically, critical writing on the topic has emphasised the hero / protagonist figure as the primary vector of player agency. However, the hero(es) of *Final Fantasy VII* (*Final Fantasy VII*, 1998) exhibit psychological depth in which party characters confront their self-delusion. This is particularly apt with Cloud who experiences an introspective reckoning while comatose that prefigures the game’s denouement. Beyond the narrative function of self-discovery, this essay argues that this process exists to reconcile the player with the JRPG ‘world’, a pan-mythological territory often reliant on signs, symbols and archetypes as exposition of an intricate and alien place. Through close reading of *FFVII*’s aesthetic and gameplay design, I aim to demonstrate that the protagonist is the nexus of player discovery, psychological characterisation and ‘lore’, and the significance of this model in the reframing and reinvention of the past common to the JRPG genre.

*Keywords:* video game, cultural studies, JRPG, narrative, genre

To say that *Final Fantasy VII* is an exceptional game is no exaggeration. It was produced in a period of significant transformation in the video game industry which saw the introduction of CD-ROM, Sony's first entry into the console market, and the formative steps towards 3D graphics on domestic gaming hardware. Squaresoft mortgaged their company in partnering with the unproven Sony following an (allegedly) fractious relationship with Nintendo<sup>1</sup>. Tens of millions were invested in costly Silicon Graphics workstations in an effort towards producing a game of unparalleled graphical quality. Sony, too, had bet significantly on Square, agreeing to finance the marketing for *FFVII* on a global scale, where the game was anticipated to penetrate Western territories where interest in the 'Japanese Role-Playing Game' had prior been marginal<sup>2</sup>. A vast stake on both parties had been placed on a new business partnership, a new console, and new technology. As lifetime sales of *FFVII* reportedly surpass 12.6M across multiple platforms, its continued availability on modern consoles, and the recent launch of the remake (*Final Fantasy VII: Remake*, 2020), makes it evident that the *FFVII*'s impact has outlived the boundaries of its origin on the PSX, now presented as an epochal game<sup>3</sup>.

The ubiquity of *FFVII*'s production appears embedded in the game itself; as it begins in the techno-dystopia of Midgar where the protagonist, Cloud Strife, participates as part of an eco-terrorist cell that successfully destroys a major power plant to prevent Shinra's exploitative harvesting of the planet's spiritual energy; the Lifestream<sup>4</sup>. The opening hours of the game surpasses the neo-medieval 'lost continents' of previous *Final Fantasy* titles towards a 'modernized' fable where it would appear that corporate greed is the true enemy of humanity. The scale of *FFVII*'s opening, which sees the player control Cloud through an act of extreme industrial terrorism, establishes the tone of high drama and moral ambiguity that persists throughout the narrative. As the game progresses, the personal history and intimate recollections of Cloud are consistently interrogated and often delusional.

The task of summarizing what a 'Japanese Role-Playing Game' (JRPG) is remains something considered nebulous even in recent discourse on the topic, but some explanation is warranted. The

JRPG is a loosely-defined genre, reasoned through a taxonomy of scale, gameplay system, and place of origin (Japan). Attempts have been made to quantify the taxonomy of the ‘JRPG’ based on gaming websites and imageboards (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018; Mallindine 2016) but this research has yet to produce a definitive term. Schules (2015) presents a distinctive reading of the ‘JRPG’ as construed more through media interrelation than ludology, stating that:

...One way to understand the Japanese qualifier of JRPGs is through its position in a larger framework of creative media brought together under the aegis of soft power. Despite soft political discourse to the contrary, JRPGs are Japanese not because of any intrinsic quality they possess; rather, they are Japanese by virtue of their relation to other creative media. (<https://www.kinephanos.ca/2015/kawaii-japan/>)

Schules’ reading posits the difficulty of a JRPG being interpreted in isolation. Further, *FFVII* comports well with Schules’ model of interrelation, given that the game is mechanically consistent as a product



Fig. 1: FFVII’s ‘Battle View’. Cloud, Barret and Tifa shown fighting a dragon.

of the *Final Fantasy* series of games, and shares thematic parallels with other anime of the time. Of particular note is *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996) in which humanity is similarly pitched against a dominant extraterrestrial force, and *The Vision of Escaflowne* (1996) which similarly reimagines the mythological realm of Gaia/Gaea and questions both the personal history and intent of its protagonists<sup>5</sup>. In addition, the overpopulated and inorganic dystopia of Midgar is resonant with Otomo's Neo-Tokyo in *Akira* (1988), to the extent that Cloud, like Kaneda, battles his opponents on a technochic motorbike in his attempt to escape the city.

The general principles of a JRPG is that they are epic, long-form games that demand a significant time investment. In the case of *FFVII*, first-time players could expect the game to require roughly 60 hours from beginning to end, with many more hours necessary to discover the vast optional content hidden in the game. The figure provided above demonstrates how the game's battle system is presented. In the image, the 'party' of Cloud, Barret and Tifa square off against a dragon, placed in opposition at the margins of the frame. A common feature of the JRPG is turn-based combat, in which the heroes exchange strikes with the enemy in sequential order. In the figure, a sub-menu is highlighted that presents abilities for the player to select in combat. The player will pick an appropriate command that the character will execute without further input. The metrics of combat (e.g. damage given, damage received), are determined by each character's statistics (stats), where numerical values are given to reflect their proficiency in certain combat tasks. The design of a JRPG typically eschews 'skill-based' input for a more tactical approach to gameplay. With *FFVII*, ease of progress will be determined by making prudent choices during combat, and tailoring the characters beforehand through allocated equipment and 'materia', mako-infused gemstones that enhance the characters with a suite of additional combat abilities. In a broader case, the appeal of a JRPG is that it presents a grand narrative that incorporates story events, exploration of the game-world, and a significant amount of combat. Progress for the player is rewarded both by the continuation of the narrative and new places to see, as well as observing the increasing proficiency of characters in combat. *FFVII* fulfills the ludic expectations of the JRPG in this regard. It should be stressed that, as a text-heavy game, that the player's continuing

interest in the game is contingent on identifying with both the sprawling storyline and the characters therein.

In terms of scholarship, much has been done in terms of covering *FFVII*'s specific relevance to its Japanese audience, with Hutchinson (2017) presenting an intricate reading of the game's anti-nuclear discourse. This is seen most clearly in the definition of 'Mako energy' as a power source harnessed from the planet's spiritual energy; highly efficient, but with a disastrous ecological toll. *Mako* is similarly catastrophic to humans exposed directly to it, prompting instances of physical mutation, loss of motor skills, amnesia, and death. The protagonist, Cloud, is himself a victim of exposure, which is reckoned with throughout the story. Central to Hutchinson's argument is that

Player agency and character identification are manipulated and disrupted by the designers, creating a self-reflexive environment where players are forced to draw connections between the gameworld and the real world.  
(2017: 72)

Where *FFVII* is most consistent is in the theme of delusion, and the extent to which the party character's beliefs and motives are founded on falsehoods. The 'Cloud' presented to the player at the game's opening - initially named 'EX-SOLDIER' [sic] is in fact neither a distinguished hero or indeed a member of SOLDIER in the first place<sup>6</sup>. Cloud's delusion comes as a result from Mako poisoning after his confrontation with Sephiroth in events set prior to the game's beginning. After plunging Sephiroth into the core of Nibelheim's reactor, Cloud falls unconscious, only to be abducted by Shinra under the malign experiments of Professor Hojo.. Cloud's identity has been refactored by the implantation of Jenova cells by Professor Hojo as part of a project to produce obedient clones of the legendary Sephiroth. Cloud's personality at the outset of the game is an amalgam of Zack (an actual member of SOLDIER whose sword Cloud now wields) and the retention of childhood memories that support this fragile identity as an elite mercenary.

Tifa is similarly deluded; she reminds him of a childhood event where Cloud vows to become a member of SOLDIER. Tifa recalls that Cloud was her closest friend in childhood, but the memories

shown later in Cloud’s subconscious proves that this impression is far from the truth. Beyond the entwined delusion of Cloud and Tifa, Barrett blames himself for the destruction of Corel and the loss of his best friend Dyne, yet he is found alive in the course of the story. Red XIII believes his father died a coward, Cait Sith is a Shinra spy, Yuffie presents herself as a legendary ninja and is in fact the runaway princess of the kingdom of Wutai. Where this dissonance between the projected self and reality is a consistent motif, they present each character a salient motive for joining Cloud on his quest.

Within the bounds of *FFVII*, the idea of heroism remains inaccessible and largely abstract. The two major heroes of Gaia are Zack and Sephiroth. The character of Zack is only directly addressed in the optional ‘secret cinema’ event towards the close of the game, and Sephiroth is dead by the events of *FFVII*, having been plunged into Nibelheim’s mako reactor through Cloud’s reckless assault; what remains is a deranged puppet acting in Jenova’s best interests. Zack is an ideal mirrored unknowingly by Cloud, where Zack - the displaced and disappeared hero of SOLDIER, remains elusive. Given that the events of Cloud and the party in *FFVII* are largely obeying a narrative engineered by Jenova, i.e. for Cloud to uncover the Black Materia on Sephiroth’s behalf, the path of heroism is only accessible to the characters once they have reconciled with the falsehoods that motivated their beginning.



Fig 2.1 Cloud’s recollection of the photograph taken at Nibelheim.

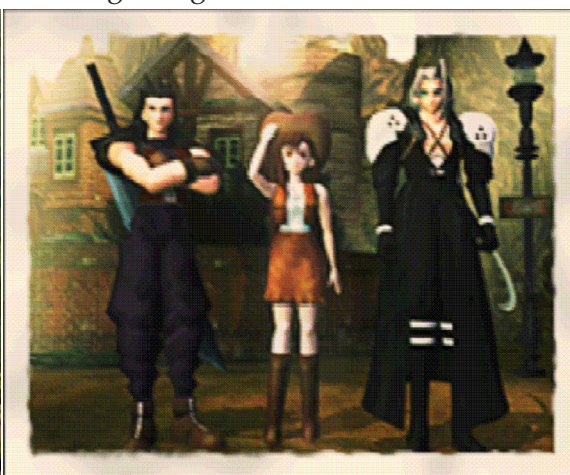


Fig 2.2. The photograph presented to Cloud in his vision of Sephiroth.



Cloud recalls the events that led him to leave SOLDIER. Fig 2.1 shows a flashback of Cloud’s triumphant return to his hometown, Nibelheim, as a proud member of SOLDIER and Sephiroth’s trusted underling. In the image, Cloud is preparing to venture to the Mount Nibel reactor to exterminate monsters terrorizing the townsfolk. A photograph is taken to inaugurate the event, with Cloud, Tifa and Sephiroth placed side by side. Cloud proceeds to detail the events at the reactor, including the ensuing destruction of Nibelheim by Sephiroth and their dramatic confrontation. The detail of these events appear to be a satisfactory recollection to both player and party, leaving only Tifa to make a stoic inquiry into Cloud’s story<sup>7</sup>. This memory unravels later in the game when Cloud experiences a vision of Sephiroth. The photograph taken in Nibelheim is presented to Cloud, but he is nowhere to be seen. In the second image, Zack appears to be Cloud’s imposter, individuated only by hair colour. Following these events, Tifa and Cloud are both engulfed in the lifestream, swallowed by a fracture to the planet’s core. Tifa exists as a spectator in Cloud’s consciousness, and begins to revisit Cloud’s accounts of the past. Significantly, Tifa now mediates these memories and confronts the inconsistencies present in Cloud’s account of his memories. The first revelation is that Tifa never saw Cloud at the fall of Nibelheim; Zack now occupies Cloud’s place in his recollection. Cloud’s second memory is the promise Cloud made to Tifa in childhood - the defining memory that made him stay in AVALANCHE. Cloud and Zack’s likeness to one another reveal the extent to which Cloud has emulated a hero past, now absent from the narrative.

Tifa encourages him to mentally revisit the memory of Nibelheim. Here, Tifa questions the approach of conscious memories as something that can be replicated, and so the probing turns to far more foundational concepts, such as his reasoning for joining SOLDIER. To define himself, Cloud reveals a ‘secret’ memory never divulged - that Tifa was part of a clique that excluded him. His memory of following Tifa, until the two fell off a perilous mountain bridge, formed a defining moment where he identified his weakness and forged a desire for strength; as a means to be noticed and included. The final memory of the ‘Nibelheim incident’ reveals Cloud as a spectator to the events he’s recalled, but in the role of an anonymous Shinra guard. Cloud is at Nibelheim as seen in fig 2.1,

but is one of the two generic Shinra guards cloaked in deep blue fatigues to the right of the image. Once Cloud is able to accept his incidental role at Nibelheim, he admits that his identity is a creation of “Jenova cells, Sephiroth’s will, and my own weaknesses”.

What differentiates Cloud’s story from other Final Fantasy protagonists is the inversion of the hero’s journey. Rather than ascend to the role of a legendary hero, the game begins with Cloud as an exceptional mercenary until the inconsistencies in his story, and accusations of being a failed replica of Sephiroth, causes a psychic fracture. What liberates Cloud is not the recovery of a hidden inner strength, but instead the acceptance of his own weakness. Cloud’s weakness refers both to his literal lack of physical strength in childhood, but more aptly refers to his urge to be ‘noticed’ by others, providing an explanation to how easily he succumbs to the illusory narrative that Sephiroth provides him. The events revealed in Cloud’s coma scene radically alter the perception of the narrative; the original duality between Cloud and Sephiroth is now one between Zack and Sephiroth, where Cloud has been displaced of the motives that have guided him thus far.

Cloud’s gesture of self-acceptance sets an optimistic tone as the game moves towards its concluding hours; that having no destined place within *FFVII*’s grand narrative is reason to persevere. In this sense, the narrative forgoes the typical moral dualism of heroic conflict, opting instead to place the awakened Cloud as an outsider, clearing up the residue of events which occurred seven years before the game’s beginning. This awakening marks a significant shift in *FFVII* as the narrative escalates to a mythic level as the party travels through to the centre of the planet to confront Jenova; a fight that culminates in a confrontation with the final, angelic incarnation of Sephiroth.

This restructuring of the classic heroic narrative is indebted to the implementation of dialogue in-game. Greg Smith’s (2002) formalist analysis of *FFVII*’s ‘cinematic dialogue’ explores how text within the game first appropriates cinematic form, then diverts from it. Much like a filmic narrative, *FFVII* sets up the motivations and goals of its key character (Cloud), at the outset, but the interactive nature of the game’s combat serves the narrative function often left to film dialogue. Thus, *FFVII*’s dialogue performs another task, as Smith notes that ‘many of the key lines of *FFVII* are there to fill us

in on the past, not to point us toward the future’. Smith’s study demonstrates that *FFVII*’s preoccupation with the past is a definitive example of game dialogue serving a function beyond the emulation of film dialogue; however, this interrogation of the past also suggests a desire to reconcile modernity to myth.

*FFVII*, at the very least, appropriates thematic elements from *Evangelion*, an anime in which teenage *mecha* pilots spar with ‘Angels’ intent on eradicating humanity<sup>8</sup>. The visual motif of a battle against an angelic figure is most distinctly seen in the confrontation with Sephiroth at the end of the game. Sephiroth’s form taken in *FFVII*’s final battle is deliberately angelic; beyond this, he is also capable of attacking the party using the entire cosmos<sup>9</sup>. Tellingly, the game *Xenogears* (1998), released after *FFVII*, culminates with the protagonist and his accomplices destroying a cruel and unfair god. *Xenogears* was created from a story initially proposed by Tetsuya Takahashi and Kaori Tanaka as the basis for *FFVII*, but turned into a new and separate IP, allegedly deemed “too dark and complicated” for one of Square’s mainline titles (Yip, 2010). Soraya Saga, a freelance writer, illustrator, and partner to Takahashi, concedes that the works of Nietzsche, Freud and Jung in particular were influential in the writing of *Xenogears*, motivated by the question of identity: “where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?”. The motif of recollecting the self plainly reappears in *Xenogears*; the protagonist, Fei Fong Wong, is a construct of a ‘monster’, a ‘coward’, and the false persona of ‘Fei’. Fei’s bifurcated identity neatly overlays with Freud’s model of the psyche (his monstrous self is literally named ‘Id’), while the imagined persona of ‘Fei’ shields him from the truth - that he is, in fact, the reincarnation of a deity known as ‘Abel’. This particular synthesis between character interiority and cosmic horror, mediated through psychology and spiritual intertext is a congruent element through *FFVII*, *Xenogears* and *Evangelion*.

In this sense, *FFVII* exists in a gulf where it mirrors the religious anxieties of *Evangelion*, develops the continuity of the *Final Fantasy* series, and establishes the major theme of identity then explored with the release of *Xenogears*. All of these texts engage in the miniaturisation of humanity through an ever-increasing scale. This structural shift reorients the hero narrative from the horizontal conflict of hero and villain towards a ‘vertical’ narrative in which humanity

lingers at the bottom rung of a totalizing mythic order. As stated prior, Cloud’s psychological growth is significant on a narrative level, and arguably gratifying to the player, but it remains that the outcome of the hero’s success (in destroying Sephiroth / Jenova) is ambiguous with regards to humanity’s long-term survival. The motifs of apocalypse and destruction is a common and long-running motif of Japanese media, but *FFVII* builds these elements into a narrative in which the hero must first remember himself before passing through the crucible.

Finally, the heroism that Cloud projects to the player in *FFVII* is just like Cloud himself. Shaped by preconceptions of what heroes are, how they start, and what they go through to become legend incarnate. The revelation is that Cloud has merely been trying his best to meet the caricature of his own hero, Zack. is not the role as one expects in the archetype of the hero’s journey; led astray by the valor of his implanted past, and in shedding that past begins to fulfill the protagonist’s role in earnest. The heroism that he is believed to hold at the outset is found to be false; true heroism is the acknowledgement that he is not the exceptional nor the chosen, but who will fight due to his newfound belief in the truth. Now, authenticity replaces deed in what makes a hero.

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## Notes

- 1 Hinrobu Sakaguchi, producer of *FFVII*, recalls the meeting with Hiroshi Yamauchi (then-President of Nintendo Japan) to officiate Square’s dissolution with Nintendo, and the ‘very warm welcome’ extended by Nintendo. Hiroshi Kawai, lead character designer on *FFVII*, curtly responds to Sakaguchi’s version of events: “What I heard was Nintendo said, ‘if you’re leaving us, never come back.’” (Leone, 2018: 70).
- 2 ‘Japanese Role-Playing Game’ is commonly expressed in the shorthand of ‘JRPG’.
- 3 <https://www.famitsu.com/news/202004/21197153.html> [Accessed 05/05/2020]
- 4 The ‘Lifestream’ is known as ‘Mako’, when converted by industrial process to an energy source. Shinra is the villainous corporation that Cloud battles throughout *FFVII* as their reckless search for *Mako* now threatens the life of the planet.
- 5 In *Escaflowne’s* Gaea, destiny itself is a physical property that can be observed with scientific apparatus, much like a photon or magnetic field. The protagonist, Hitomi, believes she is capable of using her grandmother’s necklace to predict the future - in reality, the necklace is an apparatus that allows her to alter fate. The villain, Emperor Dornkirk, similarly uses a ‘fate alteration machine’ to transform his enemies, who remain unaware of this cosmic transformation.
- 6 The terms ‘SOLDIER’ (Shinra corporations’ elite task force), ‘EX-SOLDIER’ and ‘AVALANCHE’ are represented in all-capitals in the English translation. This convention is likely due to the original terms having been distinguished in *katakana* script and given additional emphasis when transcribed.
- 7 After Cloud has recounted the events at Nibelheim, Tifa asks “Cloud? How badly was I injured when Sephiroth cut me?”. This is because, to Tifa’s knowledge, he never returned to Nibelheim.
- 8 The Angels in *Evangelion* arrive according to the written prophecy of a classified, in-universe version of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The design of the Angels closely mirror the historical depictions of Ophanim and Seraphim.
- 9 This attack in particular was altered to look much more spectacular for the Western release of *FFVII*. This version was eventually relaunched in Japan as ‘*Final Fantasy VII: International*’, in October 1997.



**Marketing**



# Heroes of Nordic Masculinity in Consumer Culture Mythology

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## Abstract

Consumer culture offers an increasingly important context for studying how heroism constructs important discursive positions and boundaries of the lifeworld of consumers. When heroism is used in advertising in order to connect brands with mythologies of national identity or the culturally ‘appropriate’ expression of ‘heroic masculinity’, it has real consequences for the choices afforded males of that culture (Avery 2012, Gentry and Harrison 2010; Molander et al 2019).

Recent trends in popular culture has highlighted ‘Nordicness’ as a theoretical perspective for understanding consumer culture (Østergaard et al 2014). The hero imagery and mythology in Nordic consumer culture seem to offer culturally specific masculine hero-mythologies: the stay-at-home father (on paternal leave), the nurturing-rebel-action hero, the ironic-anti-hero. Two very distinct examples of advertising are analysed and compared to unpack the Nordic Masculine Hero (and Anti-Hero).

**Keywords:** Gendered Heroism, Nordic Masculinity, Commercialisation of Heroism, Consumer Culture, Advertising

The aestheticization of everyday life lead to citizens, individuals, self-identifying as primarily *consumers* (Featherstone 2002; Reckwitz 2017). Consequentially, consumer culture also becomes an important battleground for negotiating politics of national and gender identities. Advertising is an important and highly obtrusive platform for these conflicts to play out, for example as narratives of male heroism. Portrayal of masculinity in advertising is often reinforcing rigid stereotypes, seriously limiting male agency in gender performances (Avery 2012, Gentry and Harrison 2010). Recently, advertising has turned to a more reflexive mode of appropriating gender discourses (e.g. Dove ads as 'brand feminism' advocating 'natural beauty', or Gillette ads attacking 'toxic masculinity'), attracting attention to the brands through public engagement in praise and criticism (Knudsen 2012, Feng et al 2019). Today, also social media supply the option for an audience to participate, rallying around the discursive positions presented in the advertising (e.g. on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter; Knudsen 2012).

In this paper, a comparative analysis of two TV-ads is used to unpack how advertising utilizes narratives of heroism in two very different ways: the Volvo ad 'Made By Sweden' featuring Zlatan Ibrahimović (Volvo 2014) and the Opel ad 'Not all are sensible enough for an Opel' (Opel 2019) featuring Niklas Bendtner. While different in the way they appropriate culture, masculinity and nationalism, both ads are designed to advertise a car brand. Both ads present a (more or less) fictional narrative in which the male protagonist is portrayed by a celebrity playing the role of 'himself'. Both celebrities are national heroes as football stars and have complex 'rebel' mythology around their public personas. Both ads have been very successful in engaging their audiences on TV, social media (spreading virally), as well as getting attention from mainstream news-media (e.g. Vestergaard 2015; Deichgräber 2019). So, while these ads are not very 'average' in the way, they are successfully integrating the pre-existing heroic mythology of the celebrities; heroic narratives are actually quite common in advertising (Stern and Gallagher 1991; Sanders and van Krieken 2018).

### **Heroism in advertising**

Advertising makes use of heroic narratives mainly as two strategic approaches: 'product as hero' or 'user as hero' (Rossiter and Percy

1997). Product as hero (or brand as hero) is a rather archaic template for demonstrating the product benefits through amplification and hyperbole, for example a brand of detergent fighting dirt and germs, 'saving' the day – often presented metaphorically as a 'knight in armour' or 'white tornado' (Stern and Gallagher 1991). However, advertising with the strategy of 'rational' positioning through product benefit claims (aka. USPs) has been seen to decline in favour of other more emotional and symbolic positioning strategies (Andersen 2004; Stigel 2001).

'User as hero' is a template seen more often in current advertising, as it is offering the advertiser a communication strategy of more diverse symbolic positioning. The objective of this advertising strategy is to infuse the brand with meaning as 'lifestyle' (Rossiter and Percy 1997), offering the 'user' (consumer) a resource for identity projects, e.g. acquiring status or performing gender. In many cases, the construction and transfer of symbolic meaning can be enhanced by the casting of a 'celebrity-user', more or less discretely turning the ad into a message of endorsement (McCracken 1989). According to McCracken (1989); the transfer of meaning from the celebrity to the brand (and subsequently the consumer) can be facilitated by merely depicting 'co-presence' in the ad: it is not essential for the celebrity explicitly to use or recommend the brand in the ad.

Storytelling in advertising is usually a very condensed and fragmented narrative, as a result of the constraints in advertising media by way of limited attention, time and involvement (Stern and Gallagher 1991, Stigel 2001, Philips and McQuarry 2010). Even just 10 seconds of advertising can tell a story and consumers are able to readily make sense of it, even if it only presents fragments (Stigel 1991). Consumers have learned the principles of narrative structure and functions since childhood, and because advertising usually reinforces deeply held cultural values, the appreciation of these narratives pose little challenge to the audiences for which they are designed (Mick et al 2004, 23). According to Sanders and van Krieken (2018), an ad offering a heroic narrative can work with a bare minimum of Propp's the elements (1928) or just fragments of archetypical events, figures and motifs of J. Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* (1949). Also well known as a generic template of the 'monomyth':

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell 1949, p. 23)

This 'journey' may include one or more of seventeen stages. Of particular interest in this context of advertising is the encounter with a supernatural aid, who may provide the hero with 'an amulet against the dragon forces'. This is an element in which the advertised brand may quite pertinently show itself as an 'amulet' (or the supernatural aid that provides the amulet).

In relation to the use of heroic narratives in advertising, Sanders and van Krieken suggests that the potential outcome of the experiences of the stories are twofold: *cathartic* or *phronetic* in nature (2018, 6). Deep sensemaking 'of higher order' leads to intense emotions (e.g. fear, relief, happiness) and feelings of pleasure, hence a *cathartic* outcome. Via simulation (e.g. as 'narrative transportation', Green and Brock 2000) the consumer adopts the role of the hero and (vicariously) undertakes the narrated journey and the experiences of the hero character. It is still an active elaboration and participation, potentially creating deep emotional bonds and a meaningful relation to the brand (Sanders and van Krieken 2018).

The *phronetic* outcome is a result of moral sensemaking based on the judgement of the depicted characters' actions and decisions, and contrasts the cathartic outcome in that it supposes a more rational, cognitive and reflexive involvement in the narrative. The phronetic outcome of a hero narrative is an opportunity for the brand and consumer to build a relation on moral judgements, examining the actions of the hero, of self and others, for example installing notions of 'prosocial behaviour'.

Sanders and van Krieken (2018) found that advertising with singular plots that *show* the story, lead to cathartic outcomes, whereas *embedded story plots*, where the hero (or someone else) is *telling a story* that is embedded (thus more explicitly narrated) are more likely to lead to phronetic outcomes. Embedded story plots and explicit narration was found to be quite common in the study of Sanders and van Krieken (ibid). For example, a Nike ad where it is *the*

*coach* of the athlete who narrates the story of the athletic hero's journey through trials to stardom (Nike 2017).

### **Hero Mythology as cultural tension**

These stories of heroic actions and the moral judgements they invite are clearly not 'simply advertising', but often tap into deeply held cultural values and *cultural tensions*, which the brand may offer to bridge as a 'magical amulet' or 'potion'.

Holt and Thompson (2004) identified how American men negotiated their male identities as a dichotic tension between a masculinity mythology of 'The Breadwinner' versus 'The Rebel'. The Breadwinner is a male hero who is aligned with social norms and abides with the rules of hierarchy. Through prosocial behaviour he gains respect, through hard work he provides for his family. He is a 'good father', but he is not expected to nurture young children with intimate contact. Rather, he will play and participate in outdoor casual 'sports' activities with the older children. The stigmas of this masculinity are that the reserved, dependable Breadwinner can be seen as 'soft' and subservient, cowardly accepting to be domesticated and robbed of his 'manhood' by power structures, women or even children.

The Rebel is the dialectical opposition to The Breadwinner: he flaunts the social norms and rejects the hierarchies. He is aggressive, uncivilized, fiercely independent and readily trades social status and respectability for absolute freedom. He is seen as fascinating, magnetic and 'sexy', but has little use for women after the act of procreation. His stigma is that he can be seen as threatening, antisocial, irresponsible, immature, a useless father and possibly even a criminal.

Based on qualitative research into the lifeworlds of male consumers, Holt and Thompson (2004) described how male consumers were constructing identities while negotiating the tensions of the 'breadwinner' and the 'rebel' into the utopian ideal of the 'Man-of-Action Hero'. The American president Ronald Reagan is an iconic model of the 'Man-of-Action Hero': a gunslinging family man, a true Christian conservative taking on the USSR in a heads-on battle for American values and 'the free world'. More recent discourses about 'disruption' have Man-of-Action Tech Heroes such as Steve Jobs, iconoclasts that are immensely successful in their rebellious

'creative destruction' of 'traditional' (read: 'obsolete', 'sedate') business models.

In American culture, these tensions are so strong as to be almost impossible to bridge or negotiate with success. In popular culture, we find (anti-)heroes such as the Walter White/Heisenberg character that struggle to resolve the tensions of The Breadwinner/Rebel, family man/drug lord in *Breaking Bad*. The morale of this particular tale is clear: these tensions cannot be resolved!

Marketers tap into this tension, for example when they advertise 'sporty', 'aggressive' cars that promise to turn consumers into 'A Rebel Hero', while perhaps also being able to perform as a family car. A recent version of this advertising strategy presents the car as a 'masculinity amulet' for male consumers facing attacks by 'feminist dragons'. For example in the Dodge 2010 ad "Man's Last Stand", we hear the males' inner monologue of how much they have to put up with, being domesticated by women. This long list of 'prosocial behaviour' is construed as emasculating (Knudsen 2012). By the logic presented in the ad, the men deserve 'the car they want', because they tolerate being domesticated: The Dodge Charger. An intertextual point in case (which is appreciated by the audience, Knudsen 2012) is that the voice-over is narrated by the actor that personifies *Dexter* in the series of the same name: a serial killer who gets away with murder, because he 'plays nice' and seemingly conforms to social norms in his job as a coroner.

### The Nordic Hero

Holt and Thompson (2004) argue that the American ideology of heroic masculinity is deeply embedded in the national mythology of the US: the gunslinger myths, the myth of 'success' (the American Dream), the 'land of the free', etc. The US also affords regional myths of identity: The American South, Hollywood, The Big Apple/New York (the Southern Nostalgia, the star-mythology of Hollywood, make it big in New York). All these myths are infused with cultural tensions, ideologies and values that marketers harness in branding and advertising (Holt 2004; 2006). In these US-centric theories of 'cultural branding', the tensions are always seen as dichotic and strong, to the point of being unresolvable, perhaps even tragic. But as the cultural context of consumer culture has come into focus, it is clear that not only the fault lines of the cultural tensions could

be different, but even the dynamics could play out differently in other cultural contexts (Askegaard and Linnet 2011, Østergaard et al 2014, Andersen 2019). In the Nordic myths of the social utopia, it is not your 'right to carry a gun' that sets you free, but the motherly care of the welfare state and the inclusive Nordic sociality of 'hygge' (Andersen et al 2019, Molander 2018, Berggren and Trågaardh 2015). This is a national (and regional) mythology popularised in lifestyle literature as 'Hygge', 'Nordic Happiness' (Wiking 2017) and 'The Swedish Theory of Love' (Partanen 2017).

A Nordic version of male heroism can be seen in a photo series by the Swedish photographer Johan Bävman called 'Swedish Dads'. It has become part of official campaigns of exporting Swedish values, and as national branding of Sweden, promoting Sweden's ideology of gender equality and the social benefits of paternal leave through exhibitions in Swedish embassies around the world (Molander 2018). Bävman followed Swedish dads in their home, documenting their strenuous journey into a magical land of nurturing infants: playing with children even when you are exhausted, cleaning the home and other mundane, but taxing challenges. In one photo, a father (slightly overweight, hair standing up) fights dust under a sofa with a vacuum cleaner; he is struggling, bending down on all four, and on his back is strapped an amused toddler in a 'backpack' baby carrier. He looks a bit like Dan Aykroyd in *Ghostbusters* when he is fighting evil ghosts, except this father is only fighting dust balls, whilst entertaining a toddler. This photo offers a different masculine 'hero', an intimate father-homemaker-action-hero. Naturally, this image is used to promote Swedish welfare ideology, not cars. But could Heroic Nordic Masculinity also sell cars?

### Made by Sweden

The Volvo XC70 ad 'Made By Sweden' featuring Zlatan Ibrahimović [ZI below] (Volvo 2014) is unusual in several respects: it is a long ad (2 minutes), really a 'brand video' (though today the borders between TV-ads and online brand videos are blurring, Knudsen 2012; Sanders and van Krieken 2018).

The featured football celebrity ZI is a national hero in Sweden, known not just by football fans. ZI was born in Sweden by immigrants, the father a Bosnian Muslim, the mother a Croat Catholic. He is famous for having a temper and for several violent epi-

sodes, both on and off the field. What is perhaps even more problematic in Sweden is his sexist remarks about female football players. He is clearly a 'Rebel Hero', challenging the social norms of moral behaviour.

The Volvo XC70 is a SUV (crossover) version of the V70 station car. The ad premiered on Swedish TV4 on January 2014 at 9 pm. Just as with important cultural events, this opening night, the first showing of the TV-ad, was advertised beforehand in newspapers and with 10-second teasers on TV. Many viewers were ready, eagerly waiting in front of the TV, and, within the first week, 60% of all Swedes had seen it on YouTube (Vestergaard 2015). The ad has had a long life on social media since its premiere showing on TV4 and as of today has had more than 7 million views on the Volvo YouTube Channel alone.

In Sweden, there are usually cultural constraints limiting blatant displays of nationalism. This ad is defiantly nationalistic, as it invokes fragments of the national anthem, performed by ZI as a voice-over, and as sung as with a female choir arrangement (although unconventionally produced, 'remixed'). The ad was reviewed in news media as a play, movie or other 'traditional art performance' (Vestergaard 2015), even in Danish media (as in *Politiken*, which reviewed it under the headline "The Volvo Zlatan ad is shameless nationalism in a good way", Ifversen 2014). The ad is quite complex and long, several threads and spaces interwoven by thematic editing, but in the present context a full shot-to-shot analysis of audio and video would take up too much space. Therefore, for this comparative analysis, the following brief sketch of the structure will suffice:

The ad opens with an aerial shot of a snow-covered Swedish landscape: forest, lakes, mountains.

Next shot is ZI sitting, half-naked, in a wooden hut by the lake. Music starts with percussion as a beating pulse. ZI gets up, grabs a wooden beam in the roof, performs pull-ups with his back to the camera so the flexing, working muscles of his, heavily tattooed muscular upper torso fill the centre of the image.

A Volvo XC70 is seen moving fast through the Swedish landscape, along a winding country road in foggy



snow. ZI's voice-over with the words of the national anthem starts.

Montage: shots of a TV-screen with ZI in a football match; ZI in close, intimate situations with his family (child with arms around ZI's neck, cuddling up with a woman, all three cuddled up reading); ZI driving to Volvo through the snow; ZI going hunting; ZI starting a camp fire; ZI jumping into the ice-covered lake through a hole in the ice swimming under water; ZI spots a deer; ZI running through the forest; ZI in shots of a TV screen, running across the football field; ZI driving fast – the car sliding – but regains control; ZI running across a mountain ridge; ZI on the hunt, sneaking in for the kill; ZI has the beautiful deer in the crosshairs of his rifle; ZI lowers his rifle (does not shoot).

Sign off: Shot of the Volvo from behind, driving through the snow in darkness. White text superimposed on the back of the car. "MADE BY SWEDEN". Black frame with Volvo logo.

A key to the interpretation of the ad is also supplied by Volvo under the video on the Volvo Sweden YouTube channel:

Sweden is our home. Mountains, vast forests, long distances, sun, rain, darkness, snow and ice. This inspires and challenges us when we develop our cars. The Swedish wilderness is our heritage and it is here we find our strength. Just like Zlatan Ibrahimović. This is our celebration of Sweden.

(Volvo 2014)

Albeit jumbled in the montage, we follow the Hero's Journey: ZI leaves the intimate comfort of home to venture into the harsh and mystical landscape of the Swedish wilderness. Mother Sweden tests him through the dark forest, mountains and icy lake water. As he glides (half) naked through the icy water of the lake, he is reborn a true Swede. A real Viking member of the Nordic tribe (groups bathing in winter is often called 'Viking associations'). The signoff message MADE BY SWEDEN (slogan) could then be interpreted:

Volvo cars are 'made BY Sweden' – not just 'in' Sweden. Volvo Cars are formed ('birthed') by the Swedish nature, just as ZI is.

Could it mean that ZI is 'reborn' a true Swede? He is infamous as a rebel, born and raised in the tough, immigrant 'ghetto' Rosengård in Malmö, far from the mountain lakes and wilderness. In the moment he decides to NOT shoot the deer, he is transformed. His journey is completed; he has found new balance. Mother Sweden has made him a true Swedish Male Hero. He can now return to the intimacy of his family, a masculine but gentle hero.

The blatant nationalism and romanticising of Swedish nature would not be possible had the hero protagonist been a blond, blue-eyed Swede named Göran. The cultural tensions that engage the national audiences for this ad are strong. The 'fig' leaf that allows the blatant use of nationalist symbolism is the background of ZI as 'immigrant' hero, already with a heroic journey from the 'ghetto' of Malmö behind him. The pre-existing Hero Mythology of ZI allows Swedish audiences to connect with the brand (through ZI), in a cultural context where this mode of nationalistic pathos (in consumer culture and elsewhere) is otherwise not politically correct (Andersen et al 2019). The ad *shows* a narrative, and therefore offers the audience a mode of narrative transportation, to vicariously experience the Hero's Journey with deep levels of sensemaking and *cathartic pleasure*.

The Volvo ad has re-inscribed Swedishness into Volvo (and by identification, the Volvo consumer), not just as Made IN Sweden, but as Made By Mother Sweden. In this sense, it is perhaps Mother Sweden who is the real hero, but a more conventional interpretation would be that Mother Sweden is the supernatural being who gives ZI the magic amulet Volvo, which facilitates the Hero's Journey (into the state of Swedishness).

### **Too sensible for Bendtner**

The ads for Opel featuring the Danish football hero Niklas Bendtner (NB) are very different: they are simple and short (18 and 22 seconds). They are laced with subtle irony instead of nationalistic pathos.

The pre-existing hero myth of NB is even more rebellious than that of ZI: in his recently published biography, he admits to drunken driving, violence and gambling sprees, flaunting all sorts of

norms and laws (even trying to bribe a police officer with 100,000 DKK that he just happened to have in his pocket). He is the anti-thesis to domestic living, to sensible cars. A brief sketch of the ads follows below:

NB walks into an Opel showroom, greets a salesperson and says, "I'd like to buy an Opel". The salesperson is sceptical: "do you really mean that?". NB insists. The salesperson replies: "but of course, please come with me". NB follows the salesperson through the showroom, but when they reach the back, the salesperson opens a door, points through it and says "this way". NB thanks the salesperson, walks through the door, which the salesperson quickly closes and locks from the inside. Standing outside behind the showroom, NB knocks on the door and calls for the salesperson to let him in – but he walks away. Sign off (pay off): superimposed text with the words "Not everyone is sensible enough for an Opel". (Opel 2019a)

NB is sitting at the salesperson's desk. The salesperson says "this is it, then", and hands NB a pen and a sales contract. NB discovers a photo with a young woman on the desk, and says: "hey, is that your daughter?". He turns it towards himself and looks at the photo. Without commenting on this seemingly innocent question, the salesperson tears up the contract and looks at NB. NB looks down, but then quietly gets up and walks out the door without a word. Sign off (text): "Not everyone is sensible enough for an Opel". (Opel 2019b)

These very short narratives makes little sense if the audiences are not already familiar with the hero mythology of NB. And they also rely on appreciation of the irony in the hero narrative, as an *Ironic Hero's (unsuccessful) Journey* (or simply as an 'ironic journey'). The Rebel Hero that NB may represent is rejected by a Breadwinner car brand: Opel (the sensible, domesticated and perhaps even boring car). But we know, that NB knows that he is being made fun of. And

we know that Opel is also framing their own brand as 'too sensible' to be an exciting car brand. In both cases this is a case of self-irony, a mode of humour that seems to be prevalent in Danish culture and advertising (Stigel 2001; Andersen 2004). The irony allows the advertiser and the audience to bond in looking at the ad itself as an 'ironic text', to share a joke together about the Rebel Hero and the Breadwinner car. In doing this, the audience may also experience a *phronetic* outcome of moral judgement (cp. The Law of Jante: 'don't get ahead of yourself').

Irony may dissolve the differences between the hero and the anti-hero, the protagonist and the antagonist. The long running advertising campaign of KIMs Chips with the evil brother of Kim - Jørgen - is another prominent example (Andersen 2004). Perhaps only in a highly ironic perspective can an Opel showroom become a "region of supernatural wonder", but if we take the perspective of the 'hero's journey', we also find that NB is a tragic hero, as his journey is unsuccessful. He cannot transform himself; he is denied the amulet of the Opel car, the magic means to transform his 'rebel' masculinity into a more successful compromise. In the second spot he seems close, but as his gaze falls directly on the dragon's eyes (the photo), he falls into the abyss of 'toxic masculinity doom'.

### Concluding remarks

With these two, contrasting glimpses into the consumer culture mythology of the Nordic Masculine Hero, we may have seen the extremes: the nationalistic pathos of Volvo and the subtle self-irony of Opel. There is undoubtedly much more detail to be unpacked in the chosen examples, and much more to be investigated in the negotiations of cultural tensions they represent.

The Hero Mythology of Nordic Masculinity may offer compromises that are more realistic or more relevant than that of Ronald Reagan, less tragic than *Breaking Bad*, or less defeatist and misogynistic than 'Man's Last Stand'. At least they may appear so to the intended Nordic audiences.

Why even use the term 'Nordic', as these examples seem clearly based in national mythology? From the intra-Nordic perspective, the differences between Sweden and Denmark seem self-evident and important to Swedes and Danes (Andersen et al 2019). However, as an international umbrella brand for the Nordic welfare societ-

ies, the contrast to other regions are much stronger (Østergaard et al 2014). The discursive territory of the Nordic societies is a different landscape compared, for example, to that of the US (Molander et al 2018). We should therefore be cautious, and not simply extrapolate or import concepts of for example, American heroism or masculinity. Potentially, we can open new discursive territory, as scholars venture into Nordic regions of supernatural wonder and bring back boons of new and nuanced discursive positions for male identity.

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**diskurs** **discourse**  
**Ideologi** **Ideology**

## (Re-)presentation of Everyday Heroes in German Post-war Newsreels (West-East)

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### **Abstract**

In the post-war period, life was challenging and required people to stand up for the community. In the two German states, however, different views of community were propagated by the media. In the 1950s and 1960s, film coverage of the cinema newsreels offered moving images for people who had no access to television. Reports underscored by music and commentary allowed political interpretations. In the GDR, persons and groups were honoured by the narrative of the newsreel *Der Augenzeuge*: for example, when students and administrative staff helped the farmers during harvest time. In this way, a 'heroic sense of community' was transferred to all 'labourers' in the community. In the West German newsreels, heroes took action in traffic or at work in dicey situations. They are role models too, but they are not meant to instigate the communities' imitation but serve education. The article aims to show the patterns and intentions of the filmic presentation of 'normal people' as heroes in Germany.

**Keywords:** Newsreels, Germany, 1950s/1960s, Cold War, Memory

## Introduction

Heroes are needed when and for as long as social or political unrest prevails (cf. Lehmann 2009, 772). They hold up the mirror to society: Where others look the other way or seem uninvolved, these individuals or groups intervene in a selfless way. Even in the post-war period, when most people had very little, and everything had to be rebuilt, there were helpers and supporting institutions, e.g. for uprooted refugees, disoriented young people or marginalised people who had been disabled as a result of war. The circumstances dictated that everyone needed to work on the behalf of marginalised groups and the community as a whole. In the two German states, however, different ideas about community and 'heroic' action were propagated by the media.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the cinema newsreel was an important part of the media system. The film coverage that was shown as the 'news part' of the pre-program in cinemas, offered moving images from Germany and all over the world for those who did not yet have access to television.<sup>1</sup> Diverse visual (film, photo, graphics) and acoustic elements (music, sound, speech) were used to attract the attention of the audience. Image and sound enabled an authentic, but also strategically designed presentation of personalities and their achievements – embedded in current contexts or flashbacks. Of particular interest is the comparison between East and West German newsreels, which reveals the contrasting state models of capitalism and socialism and raises the question of how the two states differed in their representation and attribution of meaning for the concept of 'heroism' (in terms of attitude or behaviour). By definition, 'heroes' are distinguished by special deeds in daily life (Reichholf 2009, 836). According to Allison and Goethals they have eight essential qualities ("The Great Eight"): "[...] being Caring, Selfless, and Inspiring" [...], Resilient, Reliable, Charismatic, Smart, and Strong" (Allison and Goethals 2011, 63). Not all of these traits can be assumed, but only some – and some can be stronger or weaker than others. Due to their special status, heroes can polarise or become polarised in discourse. The hero figure stands out and can therefore be either admired or mocked. Thus, heroism is to a certain extent a phenomenon of attribution and interpretation: individual or collective expectations want to be fulfilled.

I will reveal how the cinema newsreel contributed to the cultivation of 'heroic stories'. The differentiated (re-)presentation of extraordinary people and their achievements in everyday contexts will be shown in exemplary newsreels.<sup>2</sup> The selection of topics, presentation (of current events) and representation (of past events) show the different 'types of heroes' formed by the newsreel. Examples from the 1950s to 1965 (presentation) and one each from the East and the West from 1948, which were apparently also taken up in the following decade and had high relevance (representation), are used for this purpose.

The analysis follows the theoretical approach *Visual History* by Gerhard Paul (2012). According to Paul it is not a method, but an scientific attitude: Paul understands images (including film) not only as sources, but also as research objects – not only their content should be considered, but also their design – so I will deal with the aesthetics of the reports. Secondly, I refer to the approach *New Film History* by Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985), which highlights the various influences on film: e.g. economy, technology, and sociology. In this sense, not only were the films used for the studies, but also various contextual material – for example reports about cinematographers, film reviews, letters from viewers, and magazine articles, which embed the visual sources into a cultural discourse. However, the methodology of film analysis is mainly *hermeneutic* whereby for exemplary interpretation, the filmic elements and their interaction in narrative strategies must be considered in the context of the history of film and newsreels (cf. Hicketier 2012, 32-35).<sup>3</sup> Following, the establishment of post-war newsreels is explained.

### **Characteristics of the post-war newsreel**

After the Second World War, the Western Allies and the Soviet Union set up newsreels in their occupation zones according to their own specifications in order to re-educate the German population. The Germans had lost their 'war heroes', something which was brought to their attention by the British-American newsreel *Welt im Film*.<sup>4</sup> The Federal government, however, wanted to present the situation in Germany, to Germany and abroad, in a way that was independent of Allied influence. The *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau*

(NDW) was produced in Hamburg from 1950 onwards – in the first issue the narrator clarified the newsreel's claim:

We want to be interesting by presenting not only current events and sensations but also a picture of the deep seriousness of our lives and our centuries-old culture. We want to be up-to-date by making the present real and true to life according to the classical laws of our European tradition.<sup>5</sup>

The aim was to bring the audience not only closer to successes, but also to the everyday through forging connections with familiar culture. The *Welt im Film* and the *Blick in die Welt* (a newsreel influenced by France) continued to exist after 1949, then under German control. Competition on the West German newsreel market was further intensified by the fast cut American *Fox Tönende Wochenschau*. In order to ensure that the NDW was accepted by the public and cinema owners,<sup>6</sup> it was essential to avoid any heroic pathos in the reports that was all too familiar from the propaganda instrument *Deutsche Wochenschau* in war times and therefore not seen as credible. In the 1950s, West German viewers clearly articulated in letters their aversion to having to deal with political issues in the cinema: At best, a little politics at the beginning of the newsreel was acceptable.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Heinz Wiers, managing director of the NDW, assumed that the newsreels had “political significance in every respect”, that they were “potentially truly dangerous tools”. It depends “on personality, character and moral attitude”, on the “awareness of the obligation within a social community and towards other peoples” – which applies to newsreel producers especially (Wiers 1954, 38).

In East Germany, from 1946, the newsreel *Der Augenzeuge* was produced by the state film production company DEFA (Deutsche Film AG) (cf. Jordan 1996, 275). The claim of the first editor-in-chief was that this production should act as an “educator of the people” (Jordan 1990, 102). The newsreel productions were in a worldwide exchange; West and East German newsreels also exchanged film material<sup>8</sup> – but mostly in order to present each other's political and economic systems as unsuitable for a united Germany. Due to the common film and newsreel tradition (since the 1910s/1920s), the

East and West German newsreels did not differ significantly in their structure i.e. they both consisted of about eight to 15 reports, which had a total length of about ten minutes (300 m film). Each newsreel production had a trademark: a specific melodic underscored picture at the beginning and at the end of a weekly issue. The reports within an issue were intentionally positioned and often linked by linguistic, pictorial or musical associations. Like the 'lead story' of a newspaper is given special significance in the first report, for example. The topics ranged from politics, economics, culture, fashion to animal stories to sports.

### **The role of the newsreel for hero mediation**

With the beginning of public film screenings in 1895, the theatre was not the only place that heroic stories were told – this meant heroes, both fictional and real, began to be presented to a wider public. Film, as a component of collective memory (Maurice Halbwachs 1985),<sup>9</sup> illustrates excerpts from the past and the present which means that the structures of meaning for different discourses can be explored (cf. Finke 2007, 602). This also applies to the weekly newsreel. Before the establishment of television, film reports had an even higher potential of impressing the viewer with their moving image on a big screen – they complemented newspapers, magazines and radio. Heroic stories could be conveyed in various forms of reporting, not only in personal portraits, but also in reports or interviews. The editing made it possible to create a variety of designs – e.g. ellipses (omissions) to trace a life in one or two minutes, and close-ups to emphasize the hero's humanity. The identification with an exemplary person or group was controlled by the montage, because it makes one forget that the film is not an "image" but a "narrative about reality" (Finke 2007, 582-583).

The pathos of the heroic soldier as conveyed in the media during the National Socialist era has made the term 'hero' almost unspeakable from a moral point of view (cf. e.g. Lehmann 2009, 772). According to Ulrich Bröckling, Sociologist of University of Freiburg, Germany, the war hero was "totalized" in National Socialism. "All Germans should become heroic in this sense, be prepared to make sacrifices until death, until their downfall if necessary" (Leusch 2016). While in the GDR the 'label' of hero was still in use (e.g. for awards and honorary titles), and newsreel reports on 'heroic' sacri-

fices for the socialist state were intended to guide workers to increase production, in the West German newsreels 'heroism' was conveyed in a more subtle, even humorous, way. In the West German newsreels, for example, there are people in 'precarious' or challenging situations in traffic or at work who are trying to work their way through. They, too, are role models, but are not always meant to be seen as heroes, but to serve educational purposes and show viewers 'how to do better'.

As was to be expected, research in content indexes and narrative texts in the archive has revealed that the term 'hero' is found sparsely in Western newsreel productions and if heroes are mentioned then it's often in connection with sporting performances, bullfights and ironic linguistic or pictorial twists, which makes the clear and precise identification and definition of 'heroes' difficult. On both sides (East and West), however, entire parts of the world's population were stylised as heroic – especially in the context of the Cold War.

### **Types of heroes in the newsreels**

Newsreels do not define the 'hero', they do not set up generally valid criteria for 'heroes', but heroes are 'made' by the media (possibly repeated and always told in the same way), by offering the recipient interpretation or suggesting a certain interpretation. The collectively identical interpretation results in a collective attribution (von den Hoff et al. 2013, 8). Just like authenticity (Weixler 2012, 1-32) heroism becomes an attribution phenomenon. The definition of what a hero is, is the result of an interplay of media mediation and interpretation by the recipient, who, for example, is also looking for possibilities of identification or orientation (von den Hoff et al. 2013, 9).

The ideology of the GDR, the myth of the communist working hero found its way into this ideology in order to encourage people to join the ranks and secure Soviet support for the establishment of a socialist state. The types 'collective hero' and the positively connotated 'work hero' emerged (cf. Immer and van Marwyck 2013, 18). With regard to West Germany however, one can rather speak of 'economic heroes', whose companies played decisive roles in improving the social market economy. They invested time, original ideas and private energy to improve life in post-war Germany, e.g.

mail-order companies were set up that brought low-priced products to remote places (cf. Hank 2009, 827). The young Federal Republic of Germany needed a 'clean' image in order to establish itself as a market power and to join the Western world – marking an explicit departure from media propaganda<sup>10</sup>.

Basically, two types of 'heroes' can be identified in the newsreel reports: 'normal' citizens, whose exemplary behaviour is presented in everyday life, and personalities who use their special abilities, skills, talent and knowledge on a public stage or to fulfil a certain mission, such as sportsmen and politicians or scientists and astronauts. The image of both groups was of great political, social and economic benefit, as these people were also recognized abroad, and their deeds were reflected in the entire state (at least in the Western or Eastern part). Types of everyday heroes, on the other hand, stood for social values and norms, the fulfilment of which was regarded as exemplary in the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, social vacancies in society and the needs of the population were revealed. So, what distinguishes a depiction of heroes in the East German and West German newsreels? According to the observations and analysis of the newsreel editions from both West and East, the focus is on performance and supply, security and identity, as well as self-confidence and courage to (politically) resist. The latter, the political resistance, is in conformity with the respective concept of the state, i.e. the East German newsreel is about resistance against a postulated 'neo-fascism' and 'imperialism' of the West and for the West German newsreel it's about the defence against the communism and socialism of the East. These are complicated constructs, but the complexity could be reduced with the help of living models, i.e. heroes.

### **The industrious hero of the working world**

The number of awards for work heroes in the GDR grew inflationary.<sup>11</sup> Newsreel reports not only show the ceremony by heads of state and the presents for the workers – the tenor of the entire staging rather certifies that they contributed to the construction of socialism and took responsibility for progress. But these were incentives for increasing productivity with the aim of alleviating the shortage of daily consumer goods among the population. The understanding of classical heroism was used to motivate all 'working



people', i.e. the cinema-goers – people, who were watching the newsreel at that moment (cf. Frevert 2009, 810).

The miner Adolf Hennecke, who exceeded the standard for coal production by more than 300 percent in one shift on 13 October 1948, is a 'phenomenon' already described in detail in the literature. The (well-prepared) performance of the activist could not be communicated other than by the media<sup>12</sup>: A simple worker became a hero. Especially for the following generations, who were further away from his history (cf. Finke 2007, 623-624), he shows that anyone can become a hero. In keeping with this myth, miners were also the focus of reporting in the following years – they were stylized as the 'engine' of coal supply and thus of industry in the socialist economy. The East German newsreel *Der Augenzeuge* No. 28 from July 1952 shows miners who come out of the pit cage with blackened faces after their shift.<sup>13</sup> One of them is presented as Hanns Kramer, who was awarded the title 'Merited Miner', as the commentary explains. The scene is embedded in photographs of a ceremony held in honour of all miners of the GDR. In his speech in the festival hall, Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl praised the great achievements of "our miners", as the commentary paraphrases. For seconds, the camera lens focuses on Adolf Hennecke, who was always present at such ceremonial acts as a representative symbolic figure. The report also shows a woman operating a conveyor cage machine, introduced by Ruth Dombrowski. She also received an award, as the commentary says, which suggests an apparent equality of working women in the GDR<sup>14</sup>. Kramer was appointed head of the "Kollektivbrigade Fortschritt" (brigade "Progress"), which had "undertaken numerous commitments in honour of the second party conference of the SED [...]" – this commitment is said to have given new impetus to the shaft's workforce. Only later does it become clear that Kramer served the purpose of personification, as 30 miners were honoured on the stage of the festival hall. At this point, the traditional march *Glück auf* or *Steigerlied*, which is used to underscore this report, becomes more prominent. The efforts of all miners to accomplish further goals are emphasised – "in the struggle for unity and peace" and "in close friendship" with Soviet miners. Thus, it becomes obvious that this is about the 'Kollektiv' (collective of working people) – whereby the worker is the 'emissary' that enters the politicised stage of the event.

*Der Augenzeuge* No. 6 of February 1950 proceeds similarly – but the dramaturgy is less sophisticated. The report about the awards for doctors begins with a long shot of the building and the banquet hall, both of which are dominated by a banner with the inscription “Merited Doctor of the People” – the ‘monument’ that is set to be erected here is announced in this way. The female commentary voice emphasises the considerable number of 25 doctors receiving the award and documents the international attention through stating the number of guests coming from other socialist countries. The pictures, which show the audience in a long shot and the award itself in a close-up, are accompanied by the original sound of President Wilhelm Pieck’s speech. The physicians are introduced by name and the female speaker announces their specialty. The speaker also explicitly mentions the government’s financial support for public health. It follows from this that medical care is only possible if and as long as the government supported it. This implies that the workers should therefore be grateful to both the government and the collective of doctors. The cut-in orchestral music is not a march, as in the report about the miners, but a festive violin piece in keeping with the occasion and Intelligence portrayed on screen. The medal, which the camera captures with a close-up, adorns the profile of Robert Koch. In this way, a caring hero of the past is connected with current ‘medical heroes’ of the GDR.

### **The hero in times of deprivation**

At the time of the blockade of the land route to West Berlin by the Soviet Union in 1948/1949, British and American pilots became ‘heroes of the Airlift’. The narrative of the strong ‘Berliners’ was also supported. The *Welt im Film* shows the continuous use of airplanes to the supply the sealed off West Berlin. Pilots are honoured with publicity, as in *Welt im Film* No. 166 of 30 July 1948. One of the British pilots, without being named, receives a bouquet of flowers from a young woman – presented as a token of gratitude. But this is only an interruption of routine, as the commentary says – and it makes clear that the heroes continue to fly without interruption, and that their help will not stop. More than ten years later, during the construction of the Berlin Wall, the ‘Heroes of the Airlift’ were celebrated again. The *Ufa-Wochenschau*<sup>15</sup> No. 265 of 23 August 1961 shows how John F. Kennedy’s vice President Lyndon B. Johnson came to

Berlin. After his speech, in which he assures the West Berliners' sovereignty, he pushes the initiator of the Airlift, Lucius B. Clay, into the foreground on the balcony of the Schöneberg City Hall. Clay thus acts as a representative and confidante – a kind of guarantor of West Berlin's independence and freedom. The heroism of Clay is expressed just implicitly.

Whereas the 'Hero of Labour' medal was awarded<sup>16</sup> in the GDR, the 'Federal Cross of Merit' was shown in the West German newsreel. In NDW No. 87 of 25 September 1951 the first bearer, a young miner received the award for rescuing colleagues, is shown in the third report (i.e. without special placement). The report has a length of less than one minute and shows first the Order and then the ceremony by Federal President Theodor Heuss. The commentary explains that the award should be presented in the future for "extraordinary achievement". In contrast to the reports of the East German newsreel, no heroic pathos can be perceived. The award-winner is named by name, but not exuberantly praised. No mention was made of any significance of his achievement for the nation. The NDW No. 208 of 19 January 1954 reports on a doctor who had voluntarily remained in captivity in Stalingrad (Russia) in the Second World War to help fellow prisoners. This was only a short report and stood in fourth place of the edition, i.e. apparently without special meaning due to its length or positioning in the report. Just like the awards of the first Order, the report begins with a picture of the Cross of Merit; accompanied by a festive polonaise, the Federal President places the order on a ribbon around Dr Ottmar Kohler's neck. The commentary also mentions that Kohler was called the "Angel of Stalingrad", thus linking the deeds to a Christian value – instead of heroism.

### **The hero of the (political) resistance**

In the East German newsreel, border police officers were given hero status solely for their job, especially if they died during their deployment. *Der Augenzeuge* No. 3 of 1953 reports on Helmut Just, who was shot at the sector border on 30 December 1952. The rally is monstrous and reminiscent of a state funeral. A huge portrait of the 19-year-old is emblazoned above the grandstand of the Schauspielhaus in Berlin, above it the slogan "The murder of the People's Police officer warns us to: Strengthen the willingness to defend the



Fig. 1: Hero worship for a GDR border police officer

homeland” (cf. Fig. 1). In front of the building a crowd had gathered with flags, flames blazed in a bowl on a column, soldiers salute.

The commentary complains that the Volkspolizist (People’s Police officer) was murdered by “fascist bandits” (although the perpetrators could never be identified, cf. Sälter, Dietrich and Kuhn 2016, 263). The camera pans from the grandstand over the crowd onto an army vehicle with the coffin of the dead border guard on the loading area. The commentator just refers to the dead soldier as a “young patriot”, which illustrates the dead hero’s importance for the state.

The West German newsreel also shows the heroes of the resistance. In connection with the workers’ uprising on 17 June 1953, the group of GDR citizens became heroes who opposed the Soviet tanks. The NDW No. 177 of 16 June 1953 was delivered with an additional piece of film called “Sonderdienst” (special service)<sup>17</sup>. This film shows the “Hexenkessel” (witch’s cauldron) in East Berlin, where after a demonstration by construction workers against “Normerhöhungen” (increases of working standards) in front of the government building, there was a clash between “SED functionaries and workers”.<sup>18</sup> The crowd is said to have proclaimed the “general strike” in order not to be “slaves”, as the commentary explains. His voice and the music with fanfares sounds dramatic. The pictures show burning parts of buildings and a large number of people

standing by, apparently watching the hustle and bustle and appearing disoriented. The commentary identifies the counter-power as “Russen” (Russians) and “Volkspolizei” (People’s Police) ready to fire; the tanks, that have been driven up, illustrate the dangerous nature of the situation. Gun salvos can be heard as people walk across the square. The pictures of stone throwers against the tanks, which are still often shown today on commemoration days on television, express the fight of ‘David’ against ‘Goliath’.

“The Hungarians” are depicted as similarly brave, who are reported about in the *Ufa-Wochenschau* No. 15 of 7 November 1956. The report as a lead story begins with protests in America and other western countries. With banners in English: “Hungarian Heroes who died for freedom” – women and men demonstrated against the intervention of the Soviet Union in the conflict. The speaker explains how a student protest rally in Hungary developed into a revolt against communism – also supported by parts of the Hungarian army that had joined the revolutionaries. In the film, which is composed of reports from several international newsreels, the perspective of the shooters is taken, among others, so that the danger was felt by the viewers. Although there were Soviets among the dead, the Hungarians were assigned heroic status. The pictures show how the insignia of power – the Soviet stars – were removed from buildings. The fronts are thus clarified – especially, since the report shows, through a leap in time, that the Soviet army again stood against the revolutionaries ten days after the revolt and how the population fled. It’s the refugees who are shown as the suffering heroes. The music changes from whipping trombones and fanfares to violins that convey a sad mood. In contrast to the fighters, the refugees – especially women and children – are shown in emotionally charged close-ups.

### **The preserving and supporting Hero**

In order to rule out times of deprivation in the GDR, to secure supplies and to replace workers who had fled – students, administrative staff and Volkspolizei troops, amongst others, were called upon to help the farmers during harvest times. *Der Augenzeuge* No. A69 of 1958 reports on how these individuals coming from other professions responded to the call of the government and the Nationale Front (National Front)<sup>19</sup>. The enthusiasm of the people who collected

the crops and transported them on conveyor belts for loading the harvest wagons is shown in the film. The commentary explains the alleged reason: Due to unfavourable weather conditions, the rural population had fallen behind, the “rich harvest” had to be reaped and “bread for all” had to be secured – so everyone was helping. The music is reminiscent of traditional dances, light-footed and driving. The camera captures the entire process, from the crops to the grain sacks – this acceleration of time suggests that the work is done quickly. The report’s design supported the presentation of the heroic helping hands.

In West Germany, too, the labour force was scarce in the 1960s – but this was a result of the flourishing economy. Although she was committed to the homeless, a marginalised group in society, Sister Bertha Kaiser, founder of the Street Mission in Hamburg, was only implicitly honoured in NDW No. 688 of 5 April 1963. Due to the high demand for labour, there was apparently a lack of understanding both for the unemployed and the homeless and for their helpers. The report is the first in the edition and thus receives outstanding significance as a ‘lead story’. The commentary of the report sounds pejorative and cynical: The mission is described as a “curiosity of Christian charity”. The homeless would come to the mis-



Fig. 2: Sister Bertha praying with homeless people

sion “to sing, to pray and sometimes to repent”. The “reward” for praying is a warm meal. The commitment of the 94-year-old Sister Bertha would indeed do justice to the need, but hardly correspond to the “Sozialpädagogik” (social pedagogy), because normally many of the mission guests “could and should” work for the bread they receive.

Only at the end of the report did Sister Bertha (cf. Fig. 2, centre) receive some recognition as an “extraordinary woman”. She is described as having the “tenacity and steadfastness of a person who believes” and realizes “the word of love for one’s fellow man” – whether they deserve it or bought it through prayers. A heroic status was not assigned to her in this way.

### Heroes and Antiheroes

The West German newsreel also explains when it’s better *not* to be a hero. In road traffic or at work, role models appear in dangerous situations. In an obviously staged scene in NDW No. 194 of 14 October 1953, pedestrian Florian Beyer makes his way to the office in the morning and hands over his will to his wife and child. Through film trick, he comes out as a ‘knight’ in armour behind an advertising pillar and has to get through the inhumanly confusing and dangerous traffic. With difficulty he saves himself by getting onto a traffic island where he finds himself at the feet of a policeman. Subsequently, real documentary footage was used to illustrate the dramatic consequences of increasing traffic. The report ends with a warning to order the traffic fatalities to ‘stop’ – without, however, clarifying how this could be achieved.

In the series “Clever und Schussel” (“Clever and Scatterbrain”), which was produced on behalf of the Worker’s Compensation Board and was inserted in newsreel editions in the years 1956 to 1958 and 1960, two protagonists can be seen in sketches: one is the antihero (“Scatterbrain”), who despite warnings puts himself in danger, and the other is the hero (“Clever”), who can always prevent serious consequences and explains his behaviour to the antihero. In “Scatterbrain” the viewer should possibly recognize himself from case to case and seek to develop into “Clever”. *Der Augenzeuge*, on the other hand, does not show misadventures, but rather satiric short films by the DEFA production group “Das Stacheltier” (“The Hedgehog”) gave negative examples as guide-

lines for behaviour of each individual in public and socialist society such as the ruthless behaviour of pedestrians towards car drivers, rubbish being left in train compartments or harassment due to transporting bulky objects in the subway. The presentation of Anti-heroes in West and East German newsreels is purely entertaining – but the essential qualities are recognizable as well as they are with serious heroes.

### Conclusion

The characteristics of the western and eastern hero as offered to the newsreel viewers reflect the different views of community and thus the relationship of the individual hero figure to the collective. Two orientations can be observed. The western hero is usually conveyed as a lone warrior and serves as a role model to spur on further individual commitment, which is supposed to drive the economy. The East German hero is emphasized as an individual who embodies the socialist collective, which is considered with every achievement, serves the state's demands and exceeds fixed labour standards as far as possible. The state or 'the party' is the judging authority, even the authority for which a great achievement was performed as a 'favour' and as a gift. It's also here that the 'work hero' is celebrated who is missing entirely in the West German newsreel. Although the market economy is based on the earning intentions of each individual through decentralisation, NDW and *Ufa-Wochenschau* usually show working people as a mass or surrounding large group (e.g. during factory visits by politicians) – without emphasizing any one of them.

The propagation of the socialist work hero is necessarily linked to the conveyance of optimism (cf. Finke 2007, 582), i.e. the heroes and their deeds justify an optimistic view of economic conditions in the GDR. This optimism would be contradicted by the portrayal of the plight of one's own population. The existence of rescuers, however, presupposes the existence of a certain deficit, which is publicly articulated. The 'rescuing hero in times of privation' can be observed in the West German newsreel – but there are no superhumans. It is fitting that the West German newsreel allows the game between strong heroes and weak antiheroes. The contrast to the antihero makes clear that heroes can also be charismatic, inspiring and "smart" (cf. Allison and Goethals 2011, 63).



In the West as in the East, there are reports of ‘supporting heroes’ who working for the community in the sense of long-term economic or social benefits. The “Great Eight” (cf. Allison and Goethals 2011, 63) particularly attribute the caring and selfless qualities of the preserving, supporting and saving heroes. Also to be found on both sides, are the ‘heroes of political resistance’ – they reflect the Cold War particularly clearly. As fighters and at the same time victims, they embody the self-assertion of the respective German state in a world divided by superpowers. The resistance hero shows great resilience and strength in the film coverage. These heroes were obviously particularly important for the political influence of public opinion in the Cold War. The topic of heroes reveals that newsreel films should not only be read as pictorial media but should also be regarded as research objects in the sense of the *Visual History* approach through their characteristics. Depending on the degree of sensation, curiosity or severity of the consequences, heroic stories were not only edited once in the weekly newsreel, but actually return in annual reviews, too. Then as now, the memory of ‘great heroic deeds’ also takes place as part of a commemorative culture on anniversaries in television documentaries – often by using materials from newsreels (e.g. about the uprising of workers on 17 June 1952 in the GDR). The pronounced ‘heroes of everyday life’, i.e. achievements in daily life, are hardly emphasized in this way – their deeds may only be rediscovered by chance through the media. Film and television ensure that the memory of a hero remains alive – but if he is no longer mentioned, he is forgotten.

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### Endnotes

- 1 It was not until 1957 that the number of one million television subscribers was reached. Those who did not have their own television set watched at friends' or neighbours' homes or in restaurants or in front of the shop windows of equipment dealers.
- 2 **Research for the period from 1950 to 1965 in online film libraries:** For the West German productions *Welt im Film*, *Welt im Bild*, *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau*, *Ufa-Wochenschau* and *Zeitlupe*: [www.filmothek.bundesarchiv.de](http://www.filmothek.bundesarchiv.de); for the East German production *Der Augenzeuge*: <https://progress.film/>. **In addition to 'Held', other catchwords were used: Patriot, resister, helper, fighter, leader, liberator, benefactor, patron, protector, donor, supporter, rescuer, better, award winner, defender.**
- 3 Hermeneutic film analysis is intended to uncover certain principles (also patterns, frames) by way of example. Behind the "semblance of comprehensibility" of the film, the structures of the design are to be emphasized and the levels of meaning as well as potential for meaning are to be uncovered. The ambiguity of the cinematic works becomes apparent. It is a circular process that allows for a variety of connections, in which the text of the film is questioned and confronted with individual findings and interpretation results.
- 4 *Welt im Film* No. 6 of 22 June 1945 shows how officers are first searched for poison and taken away. They cross their hands behind their heads. The commentary states that they fought a hopeless battle until Germany lay in ruins.
- 5 *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau* Nr. 1 from 30.01.1950. BArch Bestand Film. <https://www.filmothek.bundesarchiv.de/video/585897>.
- 6 The cinema owners booked the newsreel with a film distributor. In the choice of the newsreel, the cinema owners were relatively free and were partly guided by audience criticism.
- 7 Spectators apparently spoke out against the cinema owners, who in turn complained to the distributor or directly to the NDW editorial staff, cf. questionnaires for cinema owners and correspondence, archived in files Beurteilungen bis 1952, NDW Bestand, Film- und Fernsehmuseum Hamburg.
- 8 Already in 1948, a contract with the *Blick in die Welt* was concluded, was stopped, and was renewed in 1953, in 1954 a contract with the NDW (cf. Jordan 1996, 283).

- 9 "Social thinking" is a memory that consists only of "collective memories," but of which only that remains "which society can reconstruct in every epoch with its present frame of reference" (Halbwachs 1985, 360).
- 10 In the sense of intended political persuasion and agitation: "Propaganda is aimed at generating, confirming, strengthening or weakening, shaping or transforming opinions, attitudes, attitudes, value architectures, ways of perception and interpretation, long-term behaviour or action (or omission)" (Zywietz 2018).
- 11 The Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (MDR) has compiled a list of awards. Accessed February 27, 2019. <https://www.mdr.de/zeitreise/artikel75686.html>.
- 12 Hennecke arrived one hour earlier than usual at work, had selected the best tools and the site before (cf. Gries and Satjukow 2002, 41-42).
- 13 In the following example analyses, quotations are taken from the newsreels cited or from the formal information in the online film libraries (see Note 8).
- 14 In the GDR, women had to work and were therefore more autonomous, but not completely equal, although this was claimed by the SED and presented accordingly in the *Wochenschau* (cf. Würz 2016).
- 15 British-American newsreel *Welt im Film* became in 1952 the *Welt im Bild* under German responsible management and in 1956 it became the *Ufa-Wochenschau*.
- 16 Awarded up to 60 people each year of the 1950s, cf. Verleihungsliste zum Ehrentitel „Held der Arbeit“ der DDR von 1950 bis 1989, by Dirk Hubrich. 2013. Accessed November 24, 2019. <https://www.deutsche-gesellschaft-fuer-ordenskunde.de/DGOWP/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/HdA-1950-1989.pdf>.
- 17 It was a film that was attached to the normal weekly film reel, as the report could no longer be integrated into the current issue after the editorial deadline. However, the event was so significant that the effort for a "Sonderdienst" was unavoidable.
- 18 In fact, units of the Kasernierte Volkspolizei (KVP) and Soviet military (cf. Grau et al. 2016) participated in the operation against the insurgent workers.
- 19 The National Front was a mass organization and union of different parties.

## Agnes Slott-Møller og heroisk nostalgi

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### **Abstract:**

“Agnes Slott-Møller and Heroic Nostalgia” addresses this Danish symbolist artist’s production of medieval heroic subjects and their place and function in her contemporary political and ideological context. Her monumental oil paintings depict Danish medieval kings and heroes, and her extensive writings advocate the role of the heroic national leader as a necessity to shape history and to defend the independence of the national Danish state. In the article, her conception of the hero, king and poet, is compared with Thomas Carlyle’s ideas and with Georg Brandes’ aristocratic radicalism. The research question is whether her nostalgia for the Middle Ages, which includes numerous paintings with folk ballads motifs, is simply backward looking and escapist; but in the light of theories about nostalgia (Boym, Smith & Campbell) it is argued that her aesthetic form of nostalgia is radical and an expression of her political commitment as a woman artist to her contemporary world.

**Keywords:** Agnes Slott-Møller, heroisme, nostalgi, kvindelige kunstnere, folkeviser



Figur 1: *Niels Ebbesen* (1893-1894), olie på lærred, 311 x 375 cm, Randers Kunstmuseum, her udstillet i *Agnes Slott-Møller – helte og heltinder*, ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum 2018. Som en del af motivationen for denne udstilling angives i dens katalog en grad af nutidig aktualitet i Slott-Møllers dyrkelse af det nationale: "Agnes Slott-Møllers undersøgelse af nationale helte og symboler udsprang af hendes ønske om at genfinde en stærk dansk identitet i en urolig samtid og kan minde om vores egen samtids søgen efter stærke nationale symboler." (Høyersten 2018, 10)

Den danske, symbolistiske kunstner Agnes Slott-Møller (1862-1937) beskæftigede sig i sine monumentale malerier med den historiske helt og heltindes rolle i Danmarkshistorien. Hendes nationale, historiske helteidealer førte hun op til sin samtid. Heroisme var en historisk agent for Agnes Slott-Møller, og hun forholdt sig æstetisk i sin billedkunst til heroisme, og hun gjorde det politisk argumenterende i sine skrifter, hvor det sønderjyske problem vejede tungt. Titlen på Slott-Møllers bog *Nationale Værdier* (1917) indikerer ståstedet for dette politiske engagement. Hvilken form for nationalisme, heltedyrkelse og nostalgi er det, der manifesterer sig i hendes produktion? Svaret herpå vil blive eftersøgt ved hjælp af Thomas

Carlyles og Georg Brandes' opfattelse af helten eller "det store menneske" i historiens gang, samt i nostalgiopfattelser (Svetlana Boym, Laurajane Smith og Gary Campbell). Både Slott-Møllers billedkunst og hendes forfatterskab vil blive inddraget, ligesom Vilhelm Wanschers teori om "Den store Stil" vil indgå for at søge at knytte politik og æstetik tættere sammen. Agnes Slott-Møllers oeuvre blev senest præsenteret på udstillingen *Agnes Slott-Møller – helte og heltinder* på ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum i 2018 (Figur 1).

### Helten som konge

Heroismebegrebet går igennem Slott-Møllers kunstneriske og litterære produktion. Hendes heroismeopfattelse, bl.a. her kongen som en helt, eller digteren som en helt, deler hun med Thomas Carlyle. Hendes forbindelse til ham kan gå gennem kredsen omkring Den Frie Udstilling, hvor ægteparret Slott-Møller arbejdede sammen med den anden symbolist J.F. Willumsen. Merete Bodelsen (1957, 37-46) har påvist en stærk Carlyle-påvirkning på Willumsen fra *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1840) og *Sartor Resartus* (1833-1834/1975), således at Carlyle kan knyttes til det danske symbolistiske miljø.

Knud den Hellige er en dansk konge, der af Slott-Møller anses for en helt. Hun beskriver ham som "en vældig Personlighed... en Helt og Konge... med sand Heltenatur" (1917, 8-9, 12), der "med uimodstaaelig Vælde førte de Danske frem til Bedrifter". Ud fra sin lovprisning af Knud den Hellige generaliserer Slott-Møller til en beskrivelse af den gode konge gennem et citat fra Knytlinge-sagen: "en Konge, som forud er prøvet i Striden, i Hærens Anførelse og i at styre Landet og holde Loven, han skal ogsaa have Forstand og Erfarenhed til at være Høvding; en Konge bør være veltalende og sagtmodig, men dog haard til at straffe efter Fortjeneste... det er ogsaa en Pryd for ham, at han er smuk og fager og anselig i sin udmærkede Dragt" (16-17). Carlyle delte denne opfattelse af kongen som helt. I kapitlet "The Hero as King" i *On Heroes and Hero-worship* skriver han:

We come now to the last form of Heroism; that which we call Kingship. The Commander over Men; he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Men... Find in



any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise him to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him: you have a perfect government for that country; no ballot-box, parliamentary eloquence, voting, constitution-building, or other machinery whatsoever can improve it a whit. It is in the perfect state; an ideal country. The Ablest Man; he means also the truest-hearted, justest, the Noblest Man (1840, 182).

Om Slott-Møller i sin heltedyrkelse et halvt århundrede senere er villig til at erstatte det parlamentariske demokrati med en heltekonige, vil blive søgt afklaret i artiklen; men hendes støtte til monarkiet er hævet over al tvivl. I anledning af Christian d. 10.s kroning i 1912 beskrev hun rosende den nye konges personlighed, og at der, til trods for det indskrænkede monarki, hvor kongemagten i sig selv er indskrænket, alligevel altid vil være "Kongemagt", "Hvor Kongens Personlighed fylder Kongemagtens Idé" (54). Hun førte den unge nye konge sammen med Knud den Store, Valdemar Sej, Valdemar Atterdag, Margrethe I.

Slott-Møller debatterede fagforeningernes og Socialdemokratiets kulturelle rolle i forhold til den danske nations beståen i sin anmeldelse af "Elverhøj Ved dets femhundrede Opførelse" (Slott-Møller 1917, 58-62). Hun så et positivt samspil mellem folket, repræsenteret af fagforeningerne, den danske kultur, repræsenteret af Det kongelige Teater, og monarkiet, i denne sammenhæng repræsenteret af Christian d. 4. Hendes konklusion er en samfundskontrakt, hvor „Kongen og Folket, det er de to store naive Begreber, det tilsammen udgør Nationen“ (60). I den korte artikel "Fædrelandets Ret" om pligten over for fædrelandet til at forsvare dets frihed og selvstændighed med våben, udstrækkes det monarkistiske heltebegreb til folket, som ligesom regenten besidder heroisme og heltedmod (Slott-Møller 1917, 117). Slott-Møllers middelalderisme (Møller i Høyersten 2018, 55-58) og monarkisme udelukker ikke en demokratisk styreform, hvori også fagforeninger spiller en rolle. Den samtidige historiske kontekstualisering kan forklare Slott-Møllers ideologiske engagement. Hun fortsætter sin argumentation for vigtigheden af kongemagten og monarkiet som garant for landets uafhængighed (52-55). Hun frygtede, at hele Danmark skulle lide Sønderjyllands skæbne og blive en del af Tyskland, og hun engagerede

sig politisk aktivt i den sønderjyske sag. Hun gik ind i bestyrelsen for Sønderjysk Samfund i 1915, og hun deltog i 1921 i Kunstnergaven til Sønderjylland. I 1915-17 var hun formand for Danske Kvinders Forsvarsforening (*Dansk kvindebiografisk leksikon*, 2019). I artiklen "Nytaarsaften 1913-14" tager Slott-Møller udgangspunkt i det danske tab af Slesvig-Holsten i 1864, og hun angriber dansk politisk defaitisme og plæderer for, at danskhedens sag i Sydslesvig er en kulturel kamp, der udkæmpes med "Holbergs Komedier, med Saxo... med Snorre og med Ingemanns historiske Romaner" (Slott-Møller 1917, 68-69, og se Møller 2019). Hun afslutter artiklen med, at Kong Knud som Danmarks Skytshelgen er et forbillede for denne kamp med "dansk Heltemod og Karakterstyrke" (73). "Dansk Kunst og Forsvarssagen" fra 1913, der er et "Aabent Brev til Danske Kvinders Forsvarsforening" (Slott-Møller 1917, 104-111) er en dystopisk skildring af Danmark erobret af Tyskland: "hvorledes det ville være at leve i Danmark, hvis selve Kongeriget blev gjort til en del af det tyske Rige." Det svar, Slott-Møller giver er, at Danmark ville lide Sønderjyllands skæbne, hvor fremmedherredømmet ville undertvinge og forvanske dansk kultur og bemægtige sig de danske kulturskatte. Den danske kunst er farlig for Preusserne, skriver Slott-Møller (110), og det åbne brev er en gennemgang af sange, monumenter, skuespil, digte, malere, billedhuggere og arkitekter, som ville blive fortyskede. Forsvarssagen med oprustning skal forhindre en sådan skæbne for Danmark, og samarbejde mellem landets kunstnere og Forsvarsforeningen skal hjælpe med at skaffe midler til landets forsvar. At kulturen skal bevares som en national værdi, jf. bogtitlen *Nationale Værdier*, synes imidlertid ikke at være ekskluderende nationalistisk. I en "Tale ved et Møde for Dansk-Vestindiens Bevarelse" plæderer Slott-Møller tværtimod for en samlen- de kulturel mangfoldighed, nemlig at "Hvad vi skulle glæde os over, er Rigdommen i Forskelligartetheden, naar den holdes sammen af den stærke Følelse af at være og ville være en Helhed." (Slott-Møller 1917, 148)

### Helten som digter

Sammenhængen mellem politisk oprustning og æstetik fortsætter Slott-Møller i flere skrifter. I "Om Fædrelandskærlighed" beskriver hun digteren, der må forstås som den eksemplariske kunstner, som "Folkets Tolk" (Slott-Møller 1917, 131). I konteksten af fædrelands-

kærlighed, hæver den kunstneriske genese sig over klassekamp og ejendomsret. "Nationale Værdier som Grundlag for en kunstnerisk Udvikling" er et meget personligt, selvbiografisk programskrift for hendes eget virke som kvindelig kunstner. Carlyle skriver, at en helt kan være en digter, når han har heroiske træk eller erfaringer, og han ser en sammenhæng mellem æstetisk virke og en samfunds-funktion for kunstneren:

the Hero can be Poet, Prophet, King, Priest or what you will, according to the kind of world he finds himself born into. I confess, I have no notion of a truly great man that could not be all sorts of men. The Poet who could merely sit on a chair, and compose stanzas, would never make a stanza worth much. He could not sing the Heroic warrior, unless he himself were at least a Heroic warrior too. I fancy there is in him the Politician, the Thinker, Legislator, Philosopher (1840, 73-74)

Agnes Slott-Møller deler Carlyles opfattelse af kunstnerens aktive funktion i samfundet. Hun beskriver sin barndom og opvækst som præget af både danskhed og æstetik. Hendes mor sang de danske folkeviser for hende, og hun læste selv danmarkshistorie. I skolen lærte hun om Eckersberg, Marstrand og Thorvaldsen, og tidligt fik hun den forestilling, "at det var dejligt at kunne tegne, for saa kunne man tegne Billeder af Danmarkshistorien, saa Alle kunne se og lære, hvorledes det hele havde været." (Slott-Møller 1917, 156) Som ung kvindelig kunstner blev hendes foretrukne genrer historiemaleriet med interesse for middelalderhistorien og landskabsbilleder. Hun understregede vigtigheden af malerkunstnerens samfundsen-gagement som led i "Folkeopdragelse" og dermed vigtigheden af motivet over udførslen: "Fremstilling af store Skikkelser, til Skil-dring af det alvorlige, det karakterfulde, det stærke og betydnings-fulde i Menneskelivet" (Slott-Møller 1917, 167). Dermed blev Slott-Møllers foretrukne genre det monumentale historiemaleri (174-175); men hun blev skuffet, da hun kun fik meget få offentlige opgaver med nationalhistoriske malerier, og måtte male de mindre, intime folkevisebilleder med tragiske temaer som erstatning (176-177). Hun slutter sit selvbiografiske skrift med en anekdote. Ved Aulum Kirke, mens hun researchede motivet til *Stolt Adelus møder*

*Terkel foran Kirken*, så hun ud gennem våbenhusets dør, og det gik det op for hende, at "her begrundes mit Liv; her hvor alt taler om Danmark og dets Minder, maner til at bevare og forbinde, at bevare Forbindelsen." (180)

Georg Brandes stillede i sin fejde med professor Høffding om aristokratisk radikalisme et spørgsmål om "de store Mennesker": "Kan den Velfærd, der er Maalet, naas uden om de store Mennesker", og han svarede selv: "Nej og atter Nej." (Brandes 1889/1978, 197) Brandes ærinde var at formidle Friedrich Nietzsches filosofi, som han kaldte aristokratisk radikalisme, til Danmark. I afhandlingen med samme navn fra 1889, forbandt Brandes på baggrund af sin Nietzsche-læsning det store menneske med velfærds- eller nyttemoral, og han konkluderede, at "Et lykkeligt Liv er umuligt; det højeste Mennesket kan naa, er et heroisk Liv, et, i hvilket der kæmpes med de største Vanskeligheder for noget, som paa en eller anden Maade kommer alle til Gode." (174) Brandes plæderede for, at en samfundskontrakt, hvori "de store Mennesker" bærer denne funktion, skal afspejles i politik, kunst og litteratur: den aristokratiske tanke. Slott-Møller fulgte Brandes forelæsninger. Brandes sendte mange af sine skrifter til kunstnere, bl.a. Agnes og Harald Slott-Møller, og hun og Brandes korresponderede (Dahlerup 2008, 109-110). Hun tog Brandes udfordring op, og hun vedgik sin påvirkning fra Brandes (1917, 164-165, 167) med sin egen stilistiske holdning, at motivet har større vigtighed end udførelsen af det. Hun ville skildre "store Skikkelser... med det alvorlige, det karakterfulde, det stærke og betydningsfulde i Menneskelivet".

Vilhelm Wanscher besvarer først i slutningen af sin *Italien og den store stil* spørgsmålet "Hvad er så egentlig den store Stil?" med "Den store Stil er Alvoren i Kunsten... Alvoren er Sjælens Fromhed, Tankens fulde indre Renhed; den hvori det mindste bliver stort ved den rette Betoning; den aabner Øjnene for Tingenes Helhed, slutte- lig ogsaa for Tingenes Sammenhæng." (1921, 140) Wanscher ser kil- den til den store Stil i kunstnerens væsen, og han eksemplificerer den store kunstner med Michelangelo, Giotto, Leonardo, Horatius, Vergilius og Dante. "Det gælder at have en førstehaands Interesse for en Mands Væsen, at kunne spore hans Stilling til det, han vil sige, og forstaa hans Afgræsning af Sagen, hans Maade at beaande denne." (141) Den store kunstner har "Storheden i sit eget Væsen" (141). Vi finder her betingelsen for være en stor kunstner er at være

en stor mand, eller i det mindste at kunne lære af mestrene. Den storhed finder Wanscher ved at skue kulturpessimistisk tilbage. Han bemærker, at "Den franske Revolution gjorde Ende paa Herredømmet; en ny, køligere eller bitrere, søgende eller sentimental Periode begyndte." Wanschers læsning af Giotto's "Tilfangetagelsen" (1304-1306) illustrerer formalistisk de stilistiske værdier, han fremhæver. Kompositionen i fresken tillader fx en bevægelse fra den ene person til den næste, som skaber "den aandelige forbindelse mellem Personerne" (1921, 64).

Hvor Wanschers ideale kunsthistoriske perioder er renaissance og barok, ligger Slott-Møllers historiske præference i middelalderen (Slott-Møller 1917, 162); men hendes og Wanschers syn på det ophøjede kunstideal har meget til fælles. Hos både Wanscher og Slott-Møller er det æstetiske og det ideologiske sammenknyttede. I essayet "Nationale Værdier som Grundlag for en kunstnerisk Udvikling" fremhæver hun for det første udviklingen af kunstnerens væsen baseret på nationale værdier, og for det andet vigtigheden af motivet for kunsten. Motivet skal indeholde "store Skikkelser, til Skildring af det alvorlige, det karakterfulde, det stærke og betydningsfulde i Menneskelivet" (167).

Agnes Slott-Møller opholdt sig i skiftende perioder i London fra 1896 til 1907. (Østermark-Johansen 2008), hvor hun tog en stærk interesse i de britiske prærafaelitter. Hun skriver i sin *Folkevisebilleder*, at hun var "direkte og umiddelbart en dansk 'Præ-Raphaelit'" (1923, 13), Denne interesse ligger dobbelt i tråd med hendes kultursyn, der var tilbageskuende til middelalderen. Prærafaelitternes ideal var, som betegnelsen siger, den tidlige kunst før Raphael med de middelalderlige håndværkeridealer, der også fandtes i Arts and Crafts-bevægelsen; og hendes betagelse af den prærafaelittes stil og motivverden var på en måde post festum, idet bevægelsen lakkede mod enden omkring 1900, hvor dens førende kunstnere var døde (Bowness 1984, 27-41; Hardin 1996, 107-110.). Det var bevægelsens realistiske stil med et romantisk præg samt dens motivverden fra de ofte elegiske Arthurianske-heltemyter, hun identificerede sig med. I England indledte Slott-Møller en romance med digteren Richard le Gallienne (Østermark-Johansen 2008, 93). Han udgav i 1909 en oversættelse af Wagners *Tristan og Isolde*. Slott-Møller brugte Tristan og Isolde som motiv i et maleripar i 1907 (Figur 2). Motivet var også yndet blandt prærafaelitterne. Dante



Figur 2. *Tristan og Isolde*. 1907. Olie på lærred. Hver 43×27 cm. Privateje. Slott-Møller deler her motivverden med de engelske prærafaelitter.

Gabriel Rossetti (1867), Edward Burne-Jones (1862, 1892), Ford Madox Brown (1864), John William Waterhouse (1916) og også William Morris (1858) brugte motivkredsen om Tristan og Isolde (Geritsen & van Melle 2000, 280).

### Heltemotiver

Slott-Møllers skildringer af danske helte og konger udelukker ikke dronninger. Der er blandt hendes monumentale værker *Dronning Margrethe I* og *Erik af Pommern* (1884), *Dronning Margrethe Erik af Pommern* og *den jyske Adel* (1889-1890), og der er *Dronning Christine i svensk Fangenskab* (1915).

*Niels Ebbesen* (1893-1894) som mandlig helt forbinder fortiden med nutiden. Den jyske adelsmand dræbte den holstenske grev Gert 1330 som et led i kampen for genetableringen af det danske kongedømme, der havde lidt under holstenske panthavere. Drabet var starten på et oprør, hvis resultat blev Valdemar Atterdag som konge også over hele Jylland. I dette motiv ses paralleller til det

sønderjyske spørgsmål, som Slott-Møller var dybt engageret i. Til hendes store skuffelse blev det store maleri, 311 x 375 cm, ikke optaget i Det Nationalhistoriske Museums samling på Frederiksborg Slot. En kreds af danske kvinder købte dog billedet og forærede det til Randers Museum (Slott-Møller 1917, 176). Slott-Møller angav selv sine frustrationer med manglende offentlige opgaver med nationalhistoriske malerier som en slags negativ motivation til at male talrige folkevisebilleder (1917, 176).

Den monumentale Valdemar Sejr-serie på seks meget store værker illustrerer Slott-Møllers dyrkelse af helten og heltekongen og "det store Menneske". De seks Valdemar Sejr-malerier skildrer historiske situationer fra Valdemar Sejrs (1170-1241) liv: *Kong Valdemar med sin Søn ved Jagtmåltidet ved Lyø i Maj 1223* (1927), *Valdemar Sejrs Hjemkomst fra Fangenskabet* (1929), *Kong Valdemars Bryllup med Dronning Dagmar* (1932), *Kong Valdemar og Dronning Bengerd* (1931), *Unge Valdemars Død paa Refsnæs* (1930) og *Spaadommen om Bengerd-sønnerne* (1934). De historiske begivenheder er flettet sammen af Slott-Møller med de personlige, således at det dynastiske og magt-politiske er forenet. Figur 3 og Figur 4 viser med patos farens og sønnens kærlighed. Først ser sønnen, den Unge Valdemar beundrende op på sin triumferende far, kongen, og dernæst ser faren med sorg ned på sin døde søn. Når det er "det store Menneske" som heltekonige, der er Slott-Møllers motiv i serien, et det lige så meget den menneskelige side, der fremhæves, som det heltedidige. Som hun skrev allerede i "Kongen og Folket", er det foreningen af personlige egenskaber og historisk betydning, der kendetegner hendes heltebegreb: "Hvor Kongens Personlighed fylder Kongemagtens Idé" (1917, 54), og i et interview om serien og Valdemar fremhævede hun ham som menneske: "Valdemar Sejr er en fremragende Personlighed, og hans Liv er fyldt med Lys og Mørke. Han er den straalende Sejrherre, men maa ogsaa taale Tilfangetagelse, Forsmædelse, han er den lykkelige Ægtemand, men mister sin elskede Dagmar og sin Søn" (Chr. Søndergaard 1932, citeret af Overgaard 2008, 21). Denne psykologisering kommer endnu stærkere til udtryk i hendes folkevisemotiver, hvor kvinder ofte kommer i fokus.

### Middelalderisme og nostalgi

Slott-Møller genoplivede middelalderen i sin kunst, og hun skrev om den gang på gang. Tison Pugh og Angela Jane Weisl skriver, at



Figur 3: Udsnit af *Kong Valdemar med sin Søn ved Jagtmåltidet ved Lyø i Maj 1223*, 1927, olie på lærred, 172 x 390 cm, Nyborg Slot, Østfyns Museer. Maleriets komposition er bygget over den sidste nadver. Judas-karakteren er Henrik af Schwerin, siddende skulende til venstre. Natten mellem den 6. og 7. maj 1223 bortførte han Valdemar og hans søn fra Lyø, og de blev først løsladt i 1225 efter hårde betingelser: en løsesum på 45.000 mark sølv, og Schwerin og Holstens lensbånd til Danmark blev løst, og alle tyske lensområder blev opgivet. Desuden måtte Valdemar stille sin tre sønner som gidsler. Danmarks forhold til Tyskland ligger implicit i den afbildede scene af den danske heltedronning, der forbinder sig til Slott-Møllers sønderjyske engagement.



Figur 4: *Unge Valdemars Død paa Refsnæs*, 1930, olie på lærred, 224 x 148 cm, Nyborg Slot, Østfyns Museer. Sønnen, den unge Valdemar omkom under jagt ved en vådeskudsulykke med en armbrøst. Ligesom de engelske prærafaelitter lod Slott-Møller kunstfærdigt udarbejdede rammer indgå i værkets helhed.



“the Middle Ages’ emerges as an invention of those who came after it; its entire construction is essentially a fantasy” (2012, 1), og titlen på deres bog *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* understreger, at hver af de senere perioders brug af et middelalderbegreb med hver deres genfødselse af middelalderen har tjent specifikke formål. De forbinder yderligere mange af middelalderismerne med nostalgi, og som udtryk for “a sense of discontentment with the present.” (3) Det er et spørgsmål, om Slott-Møllers form for middelalderisme (Møller 2018, 54-60) kan aflæses som anti-modernitet og eskapisme fra hendes nutid, eller om den kan skyldes andre bevæggrunde end et ønske om at vende tilbage til en forsvunden fortid med andre værdier, i dette tilfælde en stærk og heroisk kongemagt? Svetlana Boyms to nostalgibegreber kan hjælpe med ikke kun at besvare dette spørgsmål, men også at belyse hendes tematik i folkevisebillederne.

Boym ser nostalgi i sin grundform som længsel efter et oprindeligt objekt, der er mistet tidsligt eller stedsmæssigt (Boym 2002, 389). Hun opdeler dernæst nostalgi i to former, restorativ og refleksiv nostalgi. Restorativ nostalgi er anti-moderne og karakteriseret ved længsel efter en forestillet, mistet fortid, og den ønsker at genskabe og rekonstruere en sådan fortid. “Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead serious.” (49), skriver Boym og tilføjer, at den hører til blandt nationalistiske bevægelser. Refleksiv nostalgi, derimod, koncentrerer sig om selve længslen efter den tabte fortid og vil ikke rekonstruere den, men indeholder sværmeri for ruiner og drømme om fortiden. Fortiden sættes op som en modpol til nutiden, og den bruges til at afdække nutidens modsigelser. Boym skriver om den: “It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve from compassion, judgment and critical reflection...it is aware of the gap between identity and resemblance” (49-50). Længslen efter den tabte fortid skal altså ikke udmøntes i en rekonstruktion af fortiden, men snarere i en konstruktion af nutiden under refleksioner over noget fortidigt. Laurajane Smith og Gary Campbell (2017) går et skridt videre i deres nostalgiforståelse. De anser nostalgi som et middel til ikke bare at forstå nutiden, men til også at forme fremtiden produktivt. Nostalgi er “available for inspiring thinking and imagining that is oriented to the future.” (612) De konkluderer, at nostalgi kan være radikal og bruges samfundsmæssigt og politisk, og at nostalgi “can

be an explicit process that critically engages and navigates ways of positively addressing social change (614). Det paradoksale i Slott-Møllers fiksering på middelalderen i sin kunst sammenholdt med et glødende engagement i sin samtids aktuelle politik kan til en vis grad forklares ud fra denne nostalgiform.

Slott-Møllers middelalderisme og hendes lovprisninger af de fortidige, danske heltekonger ville ikke genoplive middelalderen, og da slet ikke de fortidige konger, hvor hun næsten morbidt flere gange skrev om deres heldedød og om deres jordiske rester i sarkofagerne (Slott-Møller 1917, 29, 35, 46-49, 52-53). Den elegiske holdning til den svundne middelalder, kom primært frem i folkevisemotiverne (se nedenfor), men ses også i motivet *Unge Valdemars Død paa Refsnæs* (Figur 4). Heltekongerne er helt døde og henligger som skeletter; men det forhindrede ikke Slott-Møller i at genoplive dem i sin kunst i æstetisk form, inspireret af de engelske prærafaelitter (Slott-Møller 1923, 13; Sevel 2018, 109), og hun hentede disse fortidige idealer op til sin egen nutid med dens politiske sammenhæng, især i det danske forhold til den tyske overmagt i konteksten af det sønderjyske spørgsmål.

Slott-Møllers verdensbillede er nostalgisk. Hun har vendt sit kunstneriske blik mod fortiden, der er et unuanceret ideal for hende; men hendes nostalgi har dog refleksive træk. Hun sætter et fortidigt forbillede op for sin nutid, både i skrifter og malerier, der kan opfattes som et radikalt middel til at påvirke hendes danske nutid. Lis Møller udtrykker sammenhængen mellem hendes middelalderisme og nutiden således: "Billederne taler om en længsel til en anden, skønnere og mere poetisk tidsalder, og netop i deres nostalgiske tilbageblik bliver de en indirekte kommentar til kunstnerens egen tid." (2018, 55; Sevel 2018, 10). Slott-Møller brugte den danske middelalder, som hun opfattede den, til at plædere for national samling og dannelse. Denne brug af middelalderen var ikke ny eller enestående. I dannelsen og konsolideringen af de europæiske nationalstater indgik dyrkelsen af middelalderlitteratur på nationalsprogene som et middel til at opbygge en national identitet. Slott-Møller fortæller, at hendes mor sang de danske folkeviser for hende som barn (1917, 155-156). Netop de danske folkeviser var blevet indsamlet og udgivet, fx *Udvalgte danske Viser fra Middelalderen* (1812-1814) og *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* fra 1853 og frem (Møller 2018, 59). I 1923 udgav Slott-Møller sin egen om *Folkevisebilleder*.

### Folkevisemotiver: Tragica

Historiemaleriet og landskabsskildringer, skriver Slott-Møller, er hendes foretrukne genrer allerede fra barndommen af (2017, 160). I den frustrerende mangel på bestillinger af historiemalerier blev størstedelen af hendes kunstneriske produktion folkeviseskildringer, der kunne forene middelalderhistoriske motiver og danske landskaber. Hun havde to tilgange til de danske folkeviser. Hun brugte dem som historiske kilder til sine helteskildringer, fx *Niels Ebbesen* (Figur 1), hvor hun kombinerede viden fra folkevisen fra 1580 (Frandsen 1966, 164-175) med sine egne studier, hvor hun lagde vægt på, at "der blev en god Sammenhæng mellem Fortid og



Figur 5: *Tidemand og Blidelil*, 1913, olie på lærred, 50 x 100 cm, privateje. Studie til maleri fra 1914 på Hotel Dagmar, Ribe. Tredelt komposition (Triptykon). Hver sign. A. S. M. Olie på lærred. Mål med ramme 50x100. Tilhørende forgyldt ramme udskåret med kvadrater og søjler efter Agnes Slott-Møllers design. Hendes trylleviser- og ridderviseskildringer er i modsætning til monumentalmaletierne ikke heroiske, men tragiske. Slott-Møller anvendte triptykonnens trefløjede format til at gengive tryllevisen fortælle-mæssigt. I venstre fløj vågner Jomfru Blidelil efter at være blevet fortryllet af Hr. Tidemands runer, som han har lært af sin styrmand Hagen. Hun hidkaldes til hans skib, tager en fjederham på, og i midterpanelet flyver hun over havet til ham i sin fortryllede forelskelse. Det er Fænø ved Lillebælt, Slott-Møller inkluderer som et landskabsmaleri i denne scene (Slott-Møller 1923, 80). I højrefløjen sætter Blidelil sig på skibets bovspryd; men Tidemand, afviser hende, og hun drukner sig. Tidemand følger hende skamfuldt i døden, og også styrmanden drukner sig under runernes forbandelse.

Nutid" (Slott-Møller 1923, 31), og fx fandt hun modellen til hesten i Vester-Velling og søgte modellen til manden blandt "de store Gaardmandsfolk på Randers-Viborg Egnen" på dyrskuer og markeder, indtil hun med besvær fandt den rette model. Hun forenede den middelalderlige folkeviser med de karaktertyper, hun fandt i sin egen nutid.

Slott-Møllers anden tilgang til folkeviser og hendes folkeviseskildringer var inden for folkevisegenrerne trylleviser og riddervis. Her er temaerne ikke heroiske, men tragiske. Hun beskrev dem som "Tragica eller Gamle Danske Historiske Elskoffs Viser, som ere lagte om saadan Kierligheds Øffvelse, som haffver taget en Tragiske eller Sørgelig Ende" (1917, 177), idet hun citerede Mette Gøyes folkevisesamling fra 1657. Produktionen var stor, også med mange skitser og forarbejder, den indeholder titler som *Agnete og Havmanden*, *Tidemand* og *Blidelil* (Figur 5), *Hr. Oluf, Ridderens Runeslag: Hr Peder under Linden*, *Ridderens Runeslag: Fru Mette*, *Hr. Lauris og hans Svende*, *Stolt Adelil*, *Hr. Ebbes Døtre*, *Gudrun ved Sigurds Lig*, *Aage og Else*, *Ebbe Skammelsøn i Bryllupsgaarden*, *Hr. Jon og Fru Bodil*, *Ebbe Skammelsøn, der hører sin egen Vise sunget*, *Terkel Trundesen* og *Stolt Adelus*, *Ribolt og Guldborg* (Figur 6), *Gunderaads Bejlen* og *Der sad to Fruer og virkede Guld*. Fælles for disse folkeviser er deres tragiske, oftest fatale og bloddryppende handling. Denne handling tager udgangspunkt i ulykkelig kærlighed, tvungne ægteskabsforbindelser og slægtsfejder, hvor kærlighed og elskov ender i Liebestod i høviske kontekster. Kvindeskikkelserne i dem fremstår som ofre for et patriarkalsk samfundssystem, men samtidig hyldede Slott-Møller disse kvindefigurers loyalitet over for deres egen kærlighed, og de forpligtelser de er underkastet. I fx *Ribolt og Guldborg* (Figur 6) flygter det elskende par fra Guldborgs slægt, og det kommer til kamp mellem Ribolt og Guldborgs morbror, far og hendes syv brødre. Ribolt beder Guldborg om ikke at nævne hans navn, så længe kampen varer, og det lykkes ham da også at dræbe alle på nær hendes yngste bror, men da udbryder hun hans navn og beder ham skåne den unge bror, forgæves dog. Fortryllesen hæves, og Ribolt får sit banesår med blodet løbende ned ad brystet, og han dør, da de når frem til hans forældre. Guldborg lades tragisk tilbage med skyld og uden sin elskede og med dræbt familie, indtil hun selv dør sammen med Ribolts mor af sorg.



Figur 6. *Ribolt og Guldborg*. (Forarbejde til oliemaleri), u. å., olie på lærred, 40x32 cm, privateje. Da Guldborg udbryder: "Ribolt, Ribolt', du stille dit sværd! / Du stille det i Vorherres Færd!", hæves fortryllelsen, og han såres dødeligt: "Og der Ribolt nævnet var, / og da fik han sit Banesaar." (Frandsen 1966, 60-65) Slott-Møller kaldte den tragiske situation, hun valgte at afbilde, for et "Dødsridt" (1923, 94).

### **Konklusion: Radikal nostalgi og aristokratisk radikalisme**

Agnes Slott-Møllers monumentale historiemalerier er mere end et symbolistisk sværmeri for middelalderen. Hendes fremstilling af

Danmarkshistoriens helte kan sammen med hendes ideologiske skrifter forstås som aktualitetssøgende, og hun brugte sine helteskildringer fra den danske middelalder til at give et politisk modbillede til sin samtid. Hendes ideologiske engagement gjaldt oprettholdelsen af den danske nation i en demokratisk form, da hun gennem det historiske sønderjyske spørgsmål så landet truet af Tyskland. Hendes endnu flere middelalderlige folkeviseskildringer gav også en forbindelse til nutiden, hvor hendes rolle som kvindelig kunstner med stærke meninger sammen med et kvindepolitisk engagement inden for et patriarkalsk system fandt ekkoer i folkevise-ernes elegiske skildringer af følelser og tunge kvindeskæbner.

Denne konklusion, der forsøger at nuancere opfattelsen af Agnes Slott-Møller som tilbageskuende og reaktionær, er nået gennem en argumentation, der har omfattet Slott-Møllers kunstneriske og ideologiske brug af heroisme med helten som samfundssammenholdende konge. Dette er kontekstualiseret i påvirkninger fra Brandes aristokratiske radikalisme med dens beundring for "de store Mennesker" som historiske agenter og fra Wanschers teori om "Den store Stil". Slott-Møllers middelalderisme og hendes stærke binding til den danske middelalder og dens helte er blevet karakteriseret i artiklen som nostalgi, men vel og mærke en politisk brugbar radikal form for nostalgi, der er lige så bundet til hendes danske nutid som til dens fortid.

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# Heltens teleologiske potentiale

Om nytænkning og mønsterbrud med helten som drivkraft

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## Abstract

Heroes can be of many types, and they can have many functions. A common trait that they all share, however, is that they represent an ideal for their followers. Ideals can serve as a driving force in people's lives and help foster individual development. The current article examines the teleological potential of heroes and its impact on individuals' life goals. The perspective of the article is philosophical, focussing predominantly on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. From this perspective, the paper explores how heroes can impact their followers to make life-changing decisions. The article therefore includes an analysis of how heroes affect the interplay between their followers' past and future. The questions of history and culture, including socialization and social heritage, also form an important part of the discussion.

**Keywords:** pattern break, life change, hermeneutics, teleology, heroes



*Bredt* defineret kan helte være fiktive eller virkelige personer, som gøres til genstand for beundring eller betragtes som forbilleder (Schlenker et al. 2008). Et for denne artikel vigtigt træk ved menneskers relation til helte og forbilleder er, at disse kan understøtte strategier i forhold til at forfølge mål og drømme eller i forhold til måder at klare specifikke situationer på. Helte kan med andre ord levere et fokuseret perspektiv for de vurderinger, vi løbende foretager i forhold til fremtiden. Det er især dette aspekt, som overskriften for denne artikel peger på: Heltens teleologiske potentiale handler om, hvordan helten kan medvirke til at trække en person i særlig og ønsket retning. Det er ikke noget tilfælde, at forbilleder ofte diskuteres som et vigtigt grundlag for især børns og unges læring og udvikling (se f.eks. Osman 2019). Inden for uddannelsesforskningen diskuteres såkaldt 'educational exemplarism' (se f.eks. Nielsen 2019) netop for at undersøge forbilledets funktion i uddannelsesøjemed.

I denne artikel fokuseres der på spørgsmålet om, hvordan vi som mennesker (i alle aldre) kan ændre kurs i forhold til det, der ofte styrer vores tanker og handlinger: fx vaner, traditioner, behovet for kontinuitet osv. Ikke fordi vi nødvendigvis *skal* ændre kurs, men når vi ønsker at gøre det, er det ofte en langsommelig og besværlig proces. Helten kan her fungere som en repræsentant for det mål, vi orienterer os mod – eller, som det blev nævnt overfor, kan helten understøtte strategier i forhold til at forfølge sine mål og drømme. 'Mønsterbrydning' bliver således et implicit tema i artiklen. Begrebet defineres ofte som det at bryde en 'negativ social arv' – eller en 'negativ udviklingsspiral' (Bach 2011: 129). I denne artikel anvendes mønsterbrydningsbegrebet dog bredere, nemlig om det at lægge bestemte tænkemåder og handlemønstre bag sig for at gøre noget andet end det, man normalt ville have gjort.

Det teoretiske afsæt for de følgende analyser hentes overvejende i et filosofisk bud på, hvordan nytænkning kan opstå. I den filosofiske hermeneutiks dybest set ret traditionsbundne tænkning finder man hos Hans-Georg Gadamer på den ene side et bud på, hvordan vi fastholdes i bestemte tænkemåder, men samtidigt siges der her en del om, hvad der skal til for at bryde selvsamme tænkemåder. Når helten tænkes ind i sådanne processer, får vi samtidigt indblik i heltens teleologiske potentiale i forhold til mønsterbrydning.

### Filosofisk hermeneutik – fra fortid til fremtid

Når vi anlægger et perspektiv på fremtiden i forhold til de ønsker og håb, vi måtte have, er der tale om en klassisk hermeneutisk proces, hvor vi trækker på den forståelse, vi allerede har af verden. I vores fortolkninger trækker vi på et forråd af betydningsmønstre, som danner baggrund for en vurdering det nye, vi møder. Således er vores fremtidsperspektiver også altid udkast baseret på erfaringer fra det liv, vi har levet. I Hans-Georg Gadamer's filosofiske hermeneutik kaldes dette forråd af betydningsmønstre forforståelser. Der er ikke blot tale om gennemskuelige og umiddelbart konstaterbare afsæt for en forståelse - som når man fx føler sig sikker på at kunne gennemføre et bestemt projekt, fordi man har gjort det før - Det, der er på spil, er langt mere komplekst og hænger sammen med det, vi også kalder socialisering – dvs. den proces, hvor individer internaliserer omgivelsernes sociale normer, kultur og historie. De forforståelser, vi bringer med, når vi fortolker det nye, er ofte internaliserede på måder, der gør dem helt selvfølgelige for os, og derfor kan de samtidigt være det, der fastholder os i bestemte (ønskede som uønskede) tænke- og handlemønstre. At få øje på det, der ligger uden for disse vante fortolkningsmuligheder, er derfor ikke oplagt. At bryde de mønstre, som historie, traditioner, vaner og indoptagede selvfølgeligheder har dannet, kræver, at noget nyt og anderledes får vores opmærksomhed. Problematikken kendes også fra læringsforskningen, hvor det, der kaldes 'transformativ læring', handler om den proces, hvor vi på et mere fundamentalt, identitetsmæssigt plan forandrer os, fordi vi forlader oprindelige grundopfattelser til fordel for nye (Illeris 2013: 13).

Selvom den løbende hermeneutiske proces, som vi befinder os i, når vi fortolker, på mange måder lægger op til at tænke vores indfældethed eller socialisering som et vilkår, giver perspektivet netop også en viden om, hvad der skal til for at ændre vores implicite forforståelser. Med et begreb hentet hos Hans-Georg Gadamer er forforståelser – uanset om vi bevarer eller forlader dem – altid 'produktive forståelsesbetingelser'. På den ene side forbliver de en forudsætning for de måder, hvorpå vi forstår – på den anden side er det netop disse forforståelser, der får os til at reagere, når noget irriterer eller pirrer (på tysk 'reizen') vores opfattelse af verden (Gadamer 2004: 284-285). Det sker, når vi møder noget i verden, der ikke uden videre lader sig integrere med vores forhåndsopfattelser.

Gennem denne irritation opstår muligheden for at revidere implícite forforståelser. Forforståelser udfordres, når noget ikke hænger sammen eller giver mening for os. Her kan vi selvfølgelig gå flere veje: Vi kan ignorere den inkonsistens, der opstår, eller vi kan bearbejde den, så alt alligevel passer sammen, men muligheden for at forlade et ståsted til fordel for et nyt findes også. Den sidste mulighed er der dog noget mere radikalt ved, fordi den sjældent sker med lethed. *Som udgangspunkt* forventer vi at kunne indføre eller tilføje ny information og viden, nye oplevelser, indsigter osv. til vores allerede eksisterende opfattelse af verden. Vi har – igen med et begreb hentet hos Gadamer – en fuldkommenhedsforventning (Gadamer 2004: 280) (på tysk 'Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit'). Denne fundamentale forventning om fuldkommenhed er et grundvilkår for menneskets måde at eksistere på. I psykologien kendes fænomenet gennem oplevelsen af 'kognitiv dissonans', der som teoretisk begreb dækker over det ubehag, vi som mennesker oplever, når fx vores forventninger skuffes – det handler dybest set om en oplevet inkonsistens (Cooper 2007: 2). Samtidigt er det akkurat sådanne inkonsistenser, der flytter os fra vante forestillinger og forventninger. Alt dette understreger, at det at indoptage nye perspektiver, at gå nye veje, udvikle sig i en ny retning, kræver et overbevisende udefrakommende 'puf'.

Et aktuelt eksempel, som kan belyse problematikken og knytte den til spørgsmålet om, hvordan helte, idoler eller forbilleder kan indgå i revisionen af fordomme, omhandler køns kategorier. Muligheden for at definere sig selv som andet end mand eller kvinde debatteres i øjeblikket heftigt. Samtidigt ser vi, at personer, der definerer sig som transkønnede, idoliseres og optræder som helte, fordi de bidrager til at sætte en ny dagsorden.<sup>1</sup> Den amerikanske skuespillerinde Laverne Cox er fx en af de mere fremtrædende repræsentanter i denne bevægelse hen mod accept af transkønnede personer. Hendes stjernestatus kommer til udtryk på mange fronter: hun har modtaget adskillige priser, været på adskillige forsider af kendte magasiner, og med knapt 4 millioner følgere på Instagram er hun utvivlsomt et forbillede for mange. Hun illustrerer netop det teleologiske potentiale, der ligger i at gøre op med bestemte tænkemåder eller i hvert fald trække dem i en retning, som ændrer noget radikalt og dermed bryder den kontinuitet, som man ellers kunne forvente. Interessant er det i øvrigt, at den fiktive superhelte-

verden først langsomt begynder at afspejle det, der foregår i den såkaldt 'virkelige verden'. Fx optræder den første transkønnede superhelte så sent som i 2019.<sup>2</sup> At superhelte er bagud for den virkelige verden, er dog ikke vigtigt her. Pointen er at vise, hvordan helte og idoler kan skabe en fremdrift i ellers fasttømrede tænkemåder, fordi de står i kontrast til indoptagede selvfølgeligheder.

### Selvdistantering som forudsætning

På baggrund af det hermeneutisk set uomgængelige forhold, at forforståelser altid er en forudsætning for ny forståelse, kan man spørge, hvordan og om der egentlig kan være tale om et brud med fortiden, når vi nyorienterer os. Første trin i revisionen af forforståelser – eller fordomme, som de også kaldes hos Gadamer (Gadamer 2004: 284) - opstår som nævnt i mødet med det, der udfordrer eller irriterer den konsistens, vi som udgangspunkt forventer i kraft af den såkaldte fuldkommenhedsforegribelse. Et næste trin i dette erkendelsesudfordrende møde peger tilbage på en selv: mødet med det nye og indtil videre fremmede synliggør ens eget ståsted. Processen giver med andre ord mulighed for at blive bevidst om de fordomme hos en selv, som ellers kan være usynlige for en selv, fordi de som del af en socialisering er indoptaget i ens tænke- og handlemåder som selvfølgeligheder. Dvs. at mødet med det fremmede tillige giver en særlig mulighed for at distancere sig til sig selv i en vurdering af ens eget ståsted. I forhold til det at have eller udse sig en helt er denne distancering ikke uvæsentlig. Spørgsmålet er nemlig, om helten overhovedet kan blive helt, hvis ikke der indgår en bevidsthed om, at helten repræsenterer noget, som man *ikke* selv er (eller måske endnu ikke er). I den forstand repræsenterer helten en mangel hos en selv – eller mere snævert kan man sige, at de egenskaber og bedrifter, som helten associeres med, repræsenterer noget, som den, der udpeger helten som helt, (endnu) ikke har. Derfor kan man hævde, at selvdistantering går forud for overhovedet at kunne sige "du er min helt". I den forstand er der både kontinuitet og brud at spore i processen. At udpege sin helt er på en gang en genkendelse af noget i en selv og en mulighed for et opgør med forforståelser og fordomme; en nyorientering. Vi får øje på det nye, fordi det *ikke* er det, vi forventede – men vi må først kaste et blik tilbage på os selv for at kunne afgøre, om vi skal forholde os positivt til det.<sup>3</sup> Hele processen kan også karakteriseres som

en glidende overgang fra fortid til en fremtid, hvor helten repræsenterer en ny identifikationsmulighed.

### Hvem bevæger hvem?

Hvad betyder det, at helten med sit implicite tilbud om identifikation peger sin følger i en særlig retning? De fleste identitetsteorier betragter identitet som et flydende samspil mellem et individs selvopfattelse og dette individs omgivelser (Jenkins 2012). Hvem eller hvad, der egentlig har kontrollen i denne proces, er derimod omdiskuteret. Som det blev vist ovenfor, kræver det at kunne udpege sin helt hermeneutisk set en form for selvindsigt eller bevidsthed om, hvem man er, som afsæt for at kunne pege sig selv i en ny retning. Med helten som orienteringspunkt for en ny retning, placeres styringen på en vis måde uden for en selv, samtidigt med at man netop selv vælger sin helt. Det sidste tema, som i denne artikel skal diskuteres i forhold til heltens teleologiske potentiale, handler derfor om denne dobbelthed mellem ydre og indre styring. Her kontrasteres tillige den filosofiske hermeneutik af et ganske andet perspektiv med nogle pointer hentet hos den amerikanske neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty.

Rorty har formuleret noget ganske centralt for spørgsmålet om hvem, der bevæger hvem i forandringsprocesser. Han skelner imellem "what you want to get out of a person or thing or text in advance and *hoping* [min fremhævning] that the person or thing or text will help you want something different - that he or she or it will help you to change your purposes, and thus to change your life" (Rorty 1998, s.106). Citatet stammer fra en diskussion om, hvad eller hvem der definerer en fortolknings sandhedsværdi, og er som sådan ikke nødvendigvis tænkt i forhold til forbilleder eller helte, men pointen er alligevel brugbar her: Man kan ville noget helt specifikt med den anden eller man kan helt uspecificeret håbe på, at den anden vil føre en i en ny retning. I begge tilfælde er det – som Rorty udlægger det – den, der som udgangspunkt vil noget med den anden, der former processen. Heltens teleologiske potentiale kontrolleres derfor snarere af følgeren end af helten, fordi det, der sætter bevægelse i tingene, er følgerens ønsker og håb. Selv der, hvor helten undervejs overtager styringen fuldstændigt, som det fx ses i sekter, hvor en karismatisk leder forfører sine tilhængere til et

totalt brud med fortiden, ændrer det ikke ved, at det som udgangspunkt er følgeren, der vil noget med helten.

I forhold til den filosofiske hermeneutik og den ovenfor beskrevne dialektiske pendlen mellem forståelsesbetingelser, mødet med 'det fremmede', selvbesindelse og heltedyrkelse synliggøres dog noget ganske andet, end dette individfokuserede perspektiv, hvor følgeren selv sætter noget afgørende i gang. De forståelsesbetingelser, som medbringes i mødet med den potentielle helt, er som nævnt indfældet i en kulturel eller historisk kontekst, som er medskaber af de implicite forforståelser. Altså må det, vi vil, ønsker og håber, ses i et større perspektiv. Kulturen og de deraf udledte forforståelser former det blik, som helten anskues med.

Sammenholder vi det filosofisk hermeneutiske perspektiv med det neopragmatiske får vi således øje på to lag i den erkendeprocess, der fører os i heltens retning. Rortys perspektiv peger på det forhold, at vi med ønsker og håb altid sætter noget i gang, som vi er individuelt ansvarlige for. Men når det gælder selve det *at få blik for* helten, må et større perspektiv inddrages, fordi vores kulturelt formede forforståelser er med til at give os netop dette blik. Helte kan anderledes formuleret kun blive helte understøttet af den kontekst, de indgår i. En person som Greta Thunberg kan f.eks. anskues som et produkt af de omstændigheder, vi befinder os i miljømæssigt og kulturelt<sup>4</sup>. Samtidigt appellerer hun sandsynligvis til den opfattelse, at der er tale om et stærkt personligt valg, når man tilslutter sig den sag, hun repræsenterer. At hun også selv fremstår som en stærk person med høj integritet understreger kun pointen.

Som nævnt i indledningen tematiserer den filosofiske hermeneutik både, hvordan vi fastholdes i bestemte tænkemåder, og hvad der skal til for at bryde selvsamme tænkemåder. Fordi begge dele tænkes inden for rammen af en kontinuitet mellem fortid, nutid og fremtid, er der ikke som sådan tale om radikale brudflader (heller ikke selvom vi taler om *mønsterbrud*). I det nye vil noget altid pege bagud i tid. Nytænkning kræver ganske vist, at noget 'forstyrrer' vores forforståelser, men det er akkurat fordi, vi har sådanne forforståelser, at vi lader os forstyrre. Vi får således ikke nogen klar adskillelse mellem såkaldt individuelle ønsker og kulturelle forudsætninger i denne form for tænkning. Så hvad sker der, når individet alligevel oplever en konflikt imellem personlige ønsker og kulturelle forudsætninger?

Et filosofisk perspektiv som Gadamer afdækker først og fremmest en række vilkår for den måde, vi indgår i verden på og for de måder, hvorpå vi forstår. Anliggendet for Gadamer var tillige et opgør med forsimplede opfattelser af, hvad der sker, når vi fortolker verden omkring os.<sup>5</sup> Alt er relationelt betinget og givet gennem større sammenhænge, end vi umiddelbart kan overskue. Derfor kan man også hævde, at den filosofiske hermeneutiks fortjeneste blandt andet er, at den bidrager til en selvbesindelse uden dog at tilbyde et facit. I forhold til det, der er denne artikels anliggende, nemlig at anskue helten som en drivkraft for nytænkning og mønsterbrud, ligger der således et bidrag til refleksion over, hvordan man *indgår* i relationen til sin helt eller sit forbillede, samt på hvilken måde relationen *udgår* fra en selv.

Et sådant filosofisk perspektiv kan, når det drejer sig om heltens funktion, oplagt suppleres af psykologiens ofte empirisk dokumenterede perspektiver. I mønsterbrydningsforskningen er det f.eks. påvist, at mønsterbrydere i reglen orienterer sig i forhold til en betydningsfuld anden person uden hvilken mønsterbrydningen ville have været utænkelig (Rutter 2012). Selvom den filosofiske hermeneutik kan anvendes som refleksionsmedium, er Gadameres tænkning dog samtidigt ontologisk funderet. Det er netop det, der ligger i understregningen af, at der også er tale om (grund)vilkår for vores måde at være i verden på.

### Konklusion

Det har i denne artikel været en grundantagelse, at helte kan være en drivkraft i forhold til at understøtte eller bevirke personlig forandring eller mønsterbrud. Derfor har helten et teleologisk potentiale. Gennem et filosofisk hermeneutisk perspektiv på, hvordan nytænkning udfolder sig, er primært to pointer kommet frem. Dels er forudsætningen, for at ændre kurs eller gøre op med sine egne forforståelser, betinget af mødet med noget eller nogen, der udfordrer den forventede konsistens, som med et begreb hentet hos Hans-Georg Gadamer kaldes en 'fuldkommenhedsforegribelse'. Helten kan netop være en sådan udfordring – en, der med et budskab om opgør med fortiden, i første runde provokerer vores opfattelser. Den anden hermeneutiske pointe er dog, at *før* vi har kastet blikket tilbage på os selv, kan helten ikke udpeges som helt. Dette dialektiske spil mellem helten og følgeren åbner derfor også det spørgsmål,

som stilles sidst i artiklen: hvem bevæger hvem? Hvor fra kommer det teleologiske potentiale? Med et citat fra Richard Rortys accentueres heltens *følger* som en grundlæggende drivkraft i bevægelsen. Individets håb og ønsker sætter i sig selv noget i gang, som har en teleologisk effekt. Som individ er det netop en nærliggende tanke, at ens egne valg tages på baggrund af en individuel orientering. Det gadamerske perspektiv går dog bag om denne umiddelbare oplevelse af selv at vælge, fordi kulturen træder frem som en vigtig drivkraft. De to perspektiver bidrager på hver sin måde til at synliggøre, hvad der kan være på færde i relationen til helten.

Den afsluttende pointe handler ikke kun om heltens teleologiske potentiale, men også om den filosofiske hermeneutiks potentiale som refleksionsmedium. I en verden, som tilsyneladende bevæger sig hurtigere end nogen sinde før, er der brug for selvbesindelse. Spørg derfor ikke, hvad du kan gøre for din helt, men spørg hvorfor helten dukkede op i dit liv og hvilken funktion helten har i dit liv.

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### Notes

- 1 At de på samme tid udkammes af dem, der vil bevare mere konservative opfattelser af køn, understreger blot, hvor stærk en faktor forforståelser er.
- 2 Se: <https://tvline.com/2019/01/18/supergirl-dreamer-suit-photo-nicole-maines-nia-nal-transgender-superhero/> (hentet 17/11-2019). Som det fremgår af artiklen er ikke blot selve superheltinden 'Dreamer' transkønnet, hun spilles også af den transkønnede Nicole Maines.
- 3 Måske kan man mod denne tese indvende, at fx et 5-årigt barn, der dyrker sin superhelt, næppe har den form for selvindsigt, som her påstås at være en forudsætning for overhovedet at kunne udpege sin helt. Selvindsigt er dog ikke nødvendigvis altid noget, man kan formulere i klare beskrivelser af, hvem man selv er – det kommer også til udtryk på langt mere ikke-ekspliciterede måder i fx en sammenligning mellem 'mig og det andet'. Barnet ved højst sandsynligt, at helten kan noget, som barnet ikke selv kan eller måske aldrig vil kunne – at helten dermed repræsenterer en mangel hos barnet selv, også selvom det ikke kan formuleres direkte.
- 4 Skellet mellem natur og kultur skal ikke diskuteres her. Men anskuer man alligevel klimakrisen som noget, der har med natur at gøre, er det oplagt, at natur og kultur indgår i et vekselvirkningsforhold, hvor kulturen stærkt præges af det, der foregår i naturen, ligesom en særlig kultur har været afgørende for den måde, naturen har udviklet sig på.
- 5 Dette anliggende kom til udtryk i Gadammers kritik af en metodefikseret videnskabsopfattelse, som især på det humanistiske område har undertrykt muligheden for at få indsigt i individuelle forhold (Riis 2017).

## 'De største forhindringer ligger meget tit i os selv'

En diskursanalytisk belysning af patientrepræsentantens rolle som filantropisk helt og fredelig systemkriger i sundhedsvæsenet

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### Abstract

Since the 1950s, the number of hospitals in Denmark has fallen from approx. 150 to approx. 30 and the average number of days for hospitalized patients has been reduced from 20 to 4 days. At the same time, the number of medical specialties has increased. Thus, the patient's contact with the healthcare system becomes both more volatile and more complex. To reduce the patient's experience of complexity patient involvement has become an increasingly important political topic. With theoretical and methodological inspiration from discourse studies and studies of heroism, the article sheds light on how the articulated use of 'warranting voices', categorizations and interpretive repertoires construct a specific patient-behavior and -agency in ways which has significant situational and character wise similarities with the construction of heroes.

**Keywords:** # the heroic patient, # health communication, # the patient as partner, # discourse studies, # warranting voices

## Baggrund og Status

Der sker i disse år gennemgribende forandringer i det skandinaviske sundhedsvæsen. Vi får eksempelvis større men stadig færre hospitaler og antallet af lægefaglige specialer er øget markant. Siden 1950'erne og frem til i dag er antallet af hospitaler faldet fra ca. 150 til ca. 30, og vi tilbringer stadig kortere tid i hospitalsengen (Riiskær 2014). Over de seneste 5 årtier er det gennemsnitlige antal dage for sengeliggende patienter på hospitaler i Danmark faldet fra 20 til 4 dage.

Parallelt med disse sundheds- og uddannelsespolitisk bårne forandringer åbnes op for nye selvstyrede behandlings- og praksisformer, der har solid politisk medvind (Sundheds- og ældreministeriet, KL & Danske Regioner 2016, Baker et al. 2016). Bag den politiske ambition om den øgede anvendelse af behandlinger, som patienten helt eller delvist selv forestår ligger en central ideologi om patient empowerment, hvor patientens rolle ændres fra passiv til aktiv. Vokabularet er mangfoldigt: Patienten som partner (Riiskær 2014), Patienten i centrum, patientcentrering, egenomsorg (Sundhedsstyrelsen 2014), det borgerstyrende sundhedsvæsen (Lomborg 2018). Fælles for overskrifterne er, at patienten i størst muligt omfang bliver ekspert på egen sygdom, og dermed øger mulighederne for at få den bedst mulige behandling (Kappelgaard 2015, Liveng 2013, Lupton 2013). Som 'patientekspert' kan man eksempelvis indgå som relevant partner i 'fælles beslutningstagning', hvor sundhedsprofessionel og patient i højere grad ansues som ligeværdige 'stemmer' (Lomborg 2018).

Ikke alene berører forandringerne relationen mellem sundhedsprofessionel og patient – de har også indflydelse på patienters interaktion med og ansvar for hinanden. Der ansættes således i disse år tidligere og nuværende patienter i regionalt regi, som skal bidrage med viden og erfaringer om hensigtsmæssige behandlingsformer (Pedersen 2008). Der arrangeres kurser og patientskoler, hvor patienter underviser patienter ligesom patientforeninger anvender såkaldte patientrepræsentanter, som gennem aktiv deltagelse kan forsøge at påvirke beslutninger gennem deltagelse i råd, nævn, udvalg og lignende (Pedersen 2008, Danske Patienter og Danske Regioner 2011).

I nærværende artikel rettes opmærksomheden mod patientens rolle som medpatient og partner i sundhedsvæsenet – det vil sige

som enten repræsentant, underviser eller guide for øvrige patienter og som aktiv medspiller i sundhedsvæsenet. Og hvorfor er dette interessant i et helteperspektiv? Ifølge Frisk opstår helteskikkelser ikke som isoleret ø, men er kædet sammen med større historiske og samfundsmæssige udviklinger (Frisk 2019). Ser vi på patientens politiske diskurshistorie, er der de seneste år sket markante brud den traditionelle opfattelse af patienten. Gennem politisk fokus på fornyelse og tilpasningsdygtighed opstår idealet om patienten som den krævende forbruger, der lægger pres på sundhedsvæsenet for at få den bedste behandling (Pedersen 2008). Desuden arbejdes der med nye styringsmekanismer, hvor pengene i højere grad skal følge patientens møde med sundhedsvæsenet (Lomborg 2018). I artiklens belyses hvorledes patienten i takt med de politisk bårne forandringer og samfundsmæssige ambitioner for sundhedsvæsenet italesættes og konstrueres som filantropisk helt og fredelig systemkriger og der argumenteres for, hvordan denne særlige konstruktion har indflydelse på ansvarsgeografien i patientens møde med sundhedsvæsenet.

### *Metode*

I artiklens analyse tages udgangspunkt i 'Håndbogen for patientrepræsentanter i sundhedsvæsenet' (Danske Patienter og Danske Regioner 2011) udarbejdet i samarbejde mellem Danske Regioner og Danske Patienter. Håndbogen er eneste publikation med patientrepræsentantens rolle og ansvar som hovedomdrejningspunkt, hvor såvel sundhedsydelse-udbyder og -modtager er repræsenteret som afsendere. Publikationens artikuleringer betragtes derfor som et centralt led i forståelsen af de diskurser der produceres diskursivt om patienten som medpatient, repræsentant for øvrige patienter og partner i sundhedsvæsenet. Publikationen er 45 sider lang og indholdsmæssigt penduleres mellem råd og vejledning i relation til patientrepræsentantens rolle og ansvarsområde, information om organisering af Sundhedsvæsenet og udtalelser fra nuværende patientrepræsentanter. Håndbogen er rettet mod patienter, der træder ind i rollen som patientrepræsentant og indledes således:

"Det er vigtigt, at patienternes interesser, erfaringer, ønsker og behov inddrages i sundhedsvæsenet. Patienter, sundhedsprofessionelle og administratorer har forskelli-

ge perspektiver på en lang række forhold af betydning for patienternes møde med sundhedsvæsenet – f.eks. kvalitet. Det er dokumenteret, at patientinddragelse skaber bedre behandlingsresultater, større tilfredshed hos patienterne og mere patientcentrerede løsninger. Patienternes viden er derfor uundværlig for kvalitetsudviklingen af Sundhedsvæsenet" (Danske Patienter og Danske Regioner 2011, s. 5)

I forlængelse af citatet, centreres den efterfølgende analyse om at besvare følgende spørgsmål:

*Hvorledes italesættes patientrepræsentanten som en 'uundværlig del af kvalitetsudviklingen i sundhedsvæsenet' og hvilken helteskikkelse konstrueres derved i relation til dennes rolle og agent-skab som partner i sundhedsvæsenet?*

### **Analysestrategi**

I den konkrete analysestrategi, som anvendes til at kaste lys over hvorledes patientrepræsentanten konstrueres diskursivt hentes inspiration fra diskurspsykologi hovedsageligt repræsenteret ved Potter og Wetherell (1987). Desuden inddrages heltestudier (Campbell 1972, Ross 2017, Frisk 2019, Marston & McDonald 2012) som forståelsesramme i den fremanalyserede patientdiskurs. I det følgende præsenteres centrale begreber fra Potter og Wetherell samt måden hvorpå denne begrebsramme operationaliseres til en konkret analytisk 'værktøjskasse'.

I diskurspsykologien er det analytiske fokuspunkt at undersøge de subtile måder, hvorpå sproget organiserer perception, ansporer til handling og skaber sociale verdener (Potter og Wetherell 1987, 1). Potter og Wetherell tager udgangspunkt i et bredt diskursbegreb, som dækker over alle mundtlige og skriftlige former for social interaktion. Diskurs forstås desuden som både konstruktion og funktion (Potter og Wetherell, 1987, 160). Funktionsbegrebet understreger, at diskurs er handlingsorienteret og stræber mod mere end blot abstrakte beskrivelser. Vi *gør* noget med vores sprog, når vi taler; anklager, forsvarer, formilder, stiller spørgsmål, retfærdiggør vores adfærd og så videre. Vi bruger sproget til at fremstille verden

på en bestemt måde, og fremstillingerne afhænger af formålet med det, vi siger (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Potter & Hepburn 2005).

Potter og Wetherell anskuer diskurser som både konstruerede og konstruerende. Diskurs er konstrueret gennem ord og kategorier, gængse antagelser eller bredere diskurser. De konstruerer samtidig selv versioner af verden gennem sproget (Potter & Hepburn 2005, s. 339).

Sprogbrug og verdensopfattelse konstituerer altså gensidigt hinanden i et vekselvirkende forhold. Hovedpointen er således, at sprogbrug aldrig er neutralt. Sproglige aktualiseringer har bredere sociale konsekvenser i forhold til, hvilke handlinger der bliver mulige og relevante inden for en given kontekst – eksempelvis sundhedsvæsenet.

På linje med øvrige socialkonstruktionistiske tilgange, tager Potter og Wetherell udgangspunkt i opfattelse af selvet som socialt skabt gennem diskurs (Potter & Wetherell 1987, 1). De er således ikke optaget af at forstå eller undersøge 'selvets indre psykologiske kerne'. Fokus rettes mod den diskursive fremstilling af selvet. Mange af de analysebegreber og -strategier, som Potter og Wetherell foreslår, centrerer om at afdække de diskursive praksisser og retoriske organiseringer hvorigennem noget eller nogen konstrueres. Kort sagt er spørgsmålet: Hvordan skabes en bestemt fremstilling af selvet og verden i en given kontekst – og hvilke effekter har denne fremstilling i den sociale virkelighed?

I relation til at operationalisere tilgangen til en konkret analysestrategi, fremhæver Potter og Wetherell at de ikke tilbyder en fiks og færdig skabelon (Potter og Wetherell 1987, 175). At anvende tilgangen i analyseøjemed handler således om at navigere og selekttere i et sæt af begreber og relaterede tilgange. I den forbindelse præsenterer Potter og Wetherell en række inspirationskilder og mulige steps i den analytiske proces, som jeg i den forestående analyse vil støtte mig til. Disse præsenteres kort i det følgende.

## Interpretive repertoires

Interpretative repertoires definerer Potter og Wetherell som "basically a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events" (1987, 138).

Med evaluering menes her en bestemt *version* af noget; beskrivelsen ikke er neutral (Potter og Wetherell 1987, 51). De interpretive repertoires anvender Potter & Wetherell som en mere snæver udgave af deres overordnede diskursbegreb. I den kommende analyse indrages interpretive repertoires som inspiration til at afdække hvilke 'symbolske navigationscentre' eller overordnede temaer, som er styrende for den diskursive konstruktion af patientrepræsentanten.

### **Den berettigende stemme (The warranting voice)**

Med inspiration fra Gergen (Gergen 1989) præsenterer Potter og Wetherell begrebet 'the warranting voice' som et udtryk for hvordan fremhævnningen af bestemte selv-identiteter sker gennem den samtidige ekskludering af andre, og hvordan der gennem specifikke 'warranting voices' legitimeres og opretholdes bestemte magtrelationer eller dominansmønstre (Potter og Wetherell 1987, s. 108-109). I analysen anvendes begrebet til at undersøge og afdække, hvorledes bestemte stemmer/aktører tildeles eller tager sin berettigelse i forhold til bestemte anliggender, og hvilke effekter dette har i relation til patientrepræsentantens rolle og agentskab som partner i sundhedsvæsenet.

### **Fakticitet**

Når en aktør italesætter en bestemt version af virkeligheden, fremstår den ikke automatisk som sand. I *Representing Reality* (1996) præsenterer Potter forskellige måder, hvorpå en version af verden kan konstrueres som sand. Eksempelvis fremhæver Potter kategorisk berettigelse samt bekræftelse og konsensus til at afdække den konstruerede fakticitet. Førstnævnte kobler sig til, hvorvidt en taler eksempelvis via en særlig titel eller rolle per definition kan påberåbe sig den rigtige udlægning af en given sag eller situation. Sidstnævnte fokuserer på hvorvidt der kan søges opbakning eller konsensus hos andre, der understøtter en særlig konstruktion af virkeligheden. Gennem analysen vil disse begreber blive anvendt til at sætte fokus på, hvad der konstrueres som fakta.

### **Analyse**

I det følgende vil det i håndbogen italesatte tema om kvalitetsudvikling gennem patientinddragelse blive behandlet analytisk ud fra følgende spørgsmål:

- Hvad er kvalitet?: Hvorledes kategoriseres kvalitet og kvalitetsudvikling i relation til patientrepræsentantens partnerskab med sundhedsvæsenet?
- Kvalitetsudviklingens berettigede stemme: Med udgangspunkt i hvilke argumenter kan eller skal patientrepræsentanten agere som 'kvalitetsudvikler'?
- Partnerskabets præmisser: På hvilke måder italesættes sundhedsvæsenet som 'partner' for patientrepræsentanten og omvendt i relation til at højne kvaliteten?

I sidste del af analysen kobles de analytiske fund med heltestudier (Campbell 1972, Frisk 2019, Ross 2017, Marston & McDonald 2012) som forståelsesramme for den fremanalyserede patientrepræsentant-diskurs. Analysens opbygning og fremgangsmåde er her inspireret af poststrukturalistisk diskursteori, hvor logikken er, at analysen skal bidrage til at opløse en fundering, og dermed afsløre de med denne fundering forbundne kategoriers radikale kontingens (Laclau & Mouffe 2002). At få øje på patientrepræsentantens konstruerethed går således i denne analyse gennem dekonstruktion (Laclau & Mouffe 2002).

### Hvad er kvalitet?

At begrebet kvalitet er et relevant udgangspunkt for analysen skyldes, at der indledningsvist i håndbogen konstrueres en forbindelse mellem kvalitet og patientinddragelse. Det ekspliciteres, at "det er dokumenteret, at patientinddragelse skaber bedre behandlingsresultater, større tilfredshed hos patienterne og mere patientcentrerede løsninger" (Danske Patienter og Danske Regioner 2011, 5) og derfor er "uundværlig for kvalitetsudviklingen". Sætningen konstrueres uden agens. Det er derfor ikke tydeligt, hvem der har dokumenteret denne sammenhæng eller på hvilken måde denne er dokumenteret. At der eksisterer et kausalforhold mellem patientinddragelse og kvalitet fremsættes således som det Potter benævner 'fakticitet formuleret som bekræftelse og konsensus', hvor dét, at sammenhængen er dokumenteret, bekræfter udsagnets korrekthed og berettigelse. Sammenhængen konstrueres således som en præsupposition, der danner grundlag for relevansen af resten af håndbogens berettigelse. Det samme gør sig gældende i sætningen "Brugerinddragelse bliver i stigende grad brugt i sundhedsvæse-



net. Den er med til at forbedre kvaliteten af de udbudte ydelser" (Ibid, 8), hvor 'udbredelsen' anvendes som berettigelsen.

Ser man nærmere på, hvad der forstås ved kvalitet, skelnes der mellem to former: "faglig kvalitet" (Ibid, 21) og "kvalitet" (Ibid, 5). Det er særligt i relation til sidstnævnte kvalitetsbegreb, patientrepræsentantens rolle kategoriseres som relevant. Indholdsmæssigt kategoriseres den 'faglige kvalitet' gennem begreber som 'klinisk høj kvalitet' og 'patientsikkerhed', mens begrebet 'kvalitet' ofte italesættes i forbindelse med 'patientcentrerede løsninger' (Ibid). Om end det italesættes at "reel inddragelse af patienternes perspektiv bygger på anerkendelse af, at patienter besidder en unik viden på samme måde, som sundhedsprofessionelle har en unik viden om behandlingsmetoder og pleje" (Ibid, 5) fremstår det umiddelbart mere tydeligt, hvad begrebet 'faglig kvalitet' dækker over, end hvad den form for kvalitet som patientrepræsentanten skal samarbejde omkring, rummer. Af den grund kan det også være vanskeligt at kategorisere, hvordan denne kvalitet kan eller skal udvikles. En tilnærmelse til, hvad kvalitet er, artikuleres gennem de potentielt afledte positive effekter af patientrepræsentantens indsats:

Som bruger af sundhedsvæsenet har du meget at tilbyde, ikke mindst din viden og erfaring. Du kan bidrage til at skabe bedre behandlingsvilkår for fremtidens patienter og deres pårørende. (Ibid, 5)

I ovenstående citat forbindes den øgede kvalitet med at kunne forbedre behandlingsvilkår for øvrige fremtidige patienter. Hvor der i det foregående citat var et fravær af agens, er der i dette citat en meget tydelig berettiget stemme, der tildeles patientrepræsentanten. Stadig er det dog ikke ekspliciteret, hvad der menes med begrebet behandlingsvilkår, hvorved kerneopgaven i kvalitetsudviklingen, stadig fremstår som udtydelig.

En anden interessant ting ved citatet er, at patientrepræsentanten, som det eneste sted i håndbogen, italesættes som 'bruger'. I traditionel forstand betragtes en bruger, som en der trækker på ressourcer i en given sammenhæng (Pedersen 2008, Lomborg 2018). I dette tilfælde artikuleres brugerrollen anderledes – som én, 'der har meget at tilbyde'. Patienten kategoriseres således som modtager og giver på samme tid.

### Kvalitetsudviklingens berettigende stemme

Hvor det kan være vanskeligt at tyde, hvad kvalitet er, er der til gengæld større tydelighed om *formålet* med at være patientrepræsentant og dermed kvalitetsudvikler. Sagt med andre ord rummer håndbogen flere bud på *hvorfor* og *hvordan* der kan bidrages til kvalitet, end *hvad* der er kvalitetsbegrebets essens.

Når formålet med patientrepræsentantens rolle i kvalitetsudvikling italesættes, synes der især at blive taget afsæt i et relations-repertoire. Eksempelvis italesættes det, hvordan forbedringspotentialet opstår, når patientrepræsentanten får mulighed for at anvende egne erfaringer til gavn for sine medpatienter:

Som patientrepræsentant hjælper du ikke kun dig selv – du repræsenterer også andre patienter og deres sag. Ofte kommer ens engagement fra egne oplevelser, og det må man gerne holde fast i. Dine egne erfaringer og oplevelser i sundhedsvæsenet hjælper dig til at se problemer, udfordringer og forbedringsmuligheder. (Ibid, 14)

Endvidere italesættes det:

Vær særligt opmærksom på, hvad andre patientgrupper ønsker eller har særligt behov for – også de patientgrupper, der ofte ikke bliver hørt, f.eks. fordi de har få personlige eller sociale ressourcer, eller fordi der er sproglige barrierer. (Ibid, 16)

I forhold til patientrepræsentanten, trækkes således også på et *filantropi-repertoire*, hvor patientrepræsentanten er uselvvisk, selvbevidst og hjælpsomt tilstede for en særlig gruppe af patienter, der italesættes som 'de overhørte' og resourcesvage. Den berettigende stemme, der samtidig underbygger patientrepræsentanten som filantrop, er centreret om den tilfredsstillende det giver at hjælpe andre:

Samarbejdet med sundhedsvæsenet kan nogle gange være udfordrende, men din indsats som patientrepræsentant vil ofte være med til at gøre en forskel – og skabe løsninger, der er bedre og mere patientcentrerede. Det føles tilfredsstillende, når det lykkes (Ibid, 19)

### Partnerskabets præmisser

Gennem italesættelsen af patientrepræsentantens filantropiske og relationsorienterede rolle, konstrueres samtidigt fakticiteter om, hvordan sundhedsvæsenet fungerer som kontekst for patientrepræsentantens indsats. Som det allerede er fremgået af de præsenterede citater kategoriseres sundhedsvæsenet som en kontekst, hvor patienten kan trække på egne erfaringer i forhold til at have oplevet 'problemer, udfordringer og forbedringsmuligheder'. Desuden italesættes sundhedsvæsenet som et sted, hvor patienter med svage ressourcer kan blive overhørt i deres behov og ønsker, og hvor det er patientrepræsentantens opgave at sikre, at disse stemmer høres i 'systemet'. At sundhedsvæsenet kan være en udfordrende samarbejdspartner underbygges flere steder i håndbogen – eksempelvis gennem formuleringer som "At være ny i rollen er interessant, men kan også være udfordrende" (Ibid, 5) og "Det er vigtigt, du passer på dig selv, særligt hvis du er patient og også skal tage hensyn til din sygdom. Du kender dine grænser, det gør omgivelserne ikke" (Ibid, 11). Gennem disse og lignende artikulationer, kategoriseres sundhedsvæsenet, som et sted, hvor patientrepræsentanten ikke kan forvente, at der tages hensyn, og hvor denne må være forberedt på at møde betydelige udfordringer.

Ud over at ekspliciteres sundhedsvæsenet som en udfordrende samarbejdspartner, formuleres også flere steder i håndbogen, på hvilke præmisser patientrepræsentanten kan eller bør imødegå disse udfordringer. Disse formuleres ofte i form af testimonials fra tidligere og nuværende patientrepræsentanter. Afsenderen er således anderledes end i den øvrige tekst, da der ikke er tale om budskaber formuleret af 'Danske regioner' eller 'Danske patienter'. Disse testimonials har karakter af at være direktivt formulerede forholdemåder fra erfarne patientrepræsentanter. Herigennem formuleres eksempelvis:

Man skal som repræsentant altid have følgende i tankerne: Vi kan anbefale, fraråde, opmuntre, anvise, håbe på og lokke, men vi har ikke den endelige beslutningskompetence. Hvis man ikke er klar over den rolle, bliver man frustreret i sit arbejde. Man skal glæde sig over de små sejre (Ibid, 16)

Man skal give udtryk for, hvad man står for af tanker og idealer, så de ansatte i sundhedsvæsenet ved, hvor de har dig. Man kommer ingen vegne med surhed. Forsøg altid med en professionel fremtoning, så kommer man længst (Ibid, 17)

De største forhindringer ligger meget tit i os selv. Du kan ikke få andre med, hvis du ikke selv går foran med en positiv holdning til dét at gøre en forskel (Ibid, 19).

Med udgangspunkt i Potters begreb om fakticitet kan man sige, at der her formuleres et sæt af adfærdsregler med kategorisk berettigelse, idet de fremsættes af personer med erfaringer i rollen. Desuden kan der argumenteres for, at der trækkes på et interpretive repertoire med fokus på dialog samarbejde og vedholdenhed i måden, patientrepræsentanten subjektiveres på. Særligt vedholdenheds-repertoiret underbygges andre steder i håndbogen. Her dog ikke formuleret i form af testimonials, men derimod med 'Danske Patienter og 'Danske Regioner' som afsender. Her ekspliciteres det eksempelvis at:

Som patienternes repræsentant i sundhedsvæsenet er din vigtigste opgave at holde fast i patienternes ønsker, behov og perspektiver samt at arbejde for, at de bliver inddraget i sundhedsvæsenets arbejde (Ibid, 5)

### **Patientrepræsentanten som diskursivt konstrueret helt**

Med udgangspunkt i den italesatte fakticitet, kategorisering og de interpretive repertoires, der trækkes på, vil jeg i det følgende argumentere for, hvorledes den diskursivt konstruerede patientrepræsentant har signifikante ligheder med såvel de forløb som de karakteregenskaber, der ofte gør sig gældende i repræsentationen af helteskikkelser (Campbell 1972, Frisk 2019, Ross 2017).

I "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" konkluderer Campbell (Campbell 1972), at der på tværs af folkeslag eksisterer ens myter. En af de såkaldte monomyter benævner Campbell 'The Hero's Journey'. Kort fortalt er 'The Hero's Journey' inddelt i tre faser. I den første bliver heltens tilværelse forstyrret af en udefrakommende begivenhed, hvorefter heltens forlader sit hjem for, sammen med en

mentor, at drage på opdagelse i en ukendt verden. Her gennemgår helten en række prøvelser, indtil han står ansigt til ansigt med sin modstander. Efter at have besejret modstanden vender helten i den sidste del af historien tilbage til den oprindelige verden med en genstand eller kraft, som han kan bruge til at genoprette freden.

Med udgangspunkt i patientrepræsentant-fortællingen kan man sige, at den forstyrrelse, der defineres i mytens første fase, allerede er indtruffet, og dermed er en del af grundpræmissen: Personen er blev ramt af sygdom – blevet patient. På samme vis som helten, der herefter drager ud på sin 'journey', bevæger patienten sig ud på en transformerende rejse som patientrepræsentant, hvor Sundhedsvæsenet udgør den ukendte verden. Patienten har som i myten en mentor ved sin side i form af relevante patientforeninger, som patientrepræsentanten opfordres til at støtte sig til, hvis udfordringerne bliver for store.

Som det er tilfældet i Campbell's beskrivelse af mytens anden fase, møder patientrepræsentanten en række udfordringer i den ukendte verden. Gennem håndbogen italesættes sundhedsvæsenet på lignende vis som et problemfyldt sted med fremmede perspektiver, som kan være udfordrende at navigere i, og hvor man skal være opmærksom på, at trække egne grænser, idet omgivelserne ikke nødvendigvis gør det. I studiet af, hvorledes socialarbejdere konstrueres som helte beskriver Marston og McDonald, hvordan heltens måde at imødekomme udfordringerne på handler om 'Overcoming significant structural obstacles in order to improve standards of living for poor people in general and women in particular' (Marston og McDonald 2012). På samme vis trækkes der gennem håndbogen på interpretive repertoires, kategoriseringer og kategorisk berettigelse, der centrerer om, hvorledes de imødesete udfordringer i sundhedsvæsenet tjener et højere formål: At hjælpe medpatienter – herunder særligt de, som har få ressourcer og som er i risiko for at blive overhørt i systemet. Med på den udfordrende rejse bringer patientrepræsentanten klassiske heroiske karaktertræk som vedholdenhed og mod, og i mødet med udfordringer opfordres patientrepræsentanten gennem direktivt formulerede testimonials fra andre patientrepræsentanter til at forblive 'calm in action' (Campbell 1972) ved at være dialogorienterede, venlige, samarbejdsvillige mv.

På sidste del af 'the hero's journey' vender helten hjem med den kraft, der skal genskabe fred og orden. Helten står nu med et ben i to verdener og forstår, hvordan vedkommende er blevet en oplyst del af noget større (Campbell 1972, Ross 2017). At blive en oplyst del af noget større italesættes gennem håndbogen blandt andet gennem at kende og acceptere præmissen for partnerskabet med sundhedsvæsenet. Det italesættes således gentagne gange, hvordan det er patienten, der skal 'sno sig', anvende sin viden og indsigt om sundhedsvæsenet, for at bringe den vigtige kraft hjem: Indflydelse på nuværende og fremtidige patienters vilkår. Herved er patientrepræsentanten i denne fase blevet en oplyst systemkriger, der med fredelige midler (eksempelvis anbefale, fraråde, opmuntre, anviser, håber på og lokke) kan forbedre vilkårene for sine medpatienter.

Som enhver anden god helt tager helten ansvaret på sig. I stedet for at udråbe den fremmede verden som et umuligt sted, hvor man skal gå så grueligt meget igennem, fokuseres der på, hvorledes patientrepræsentanten selv udgør mulighedsrummet og forhindringen ('De største hindringer ligger meget tit hos os selv'). Man kan således sige, at der i konstruktionen af patientrepræsentanten som helt placeres et stærkt agentskab, hvor det er patientrepræsentanterne, der skal navigere og søge indflydelse på sundhedsvæsenets præmisser og ikke omvendt.

### Konklusion

Som det er fremgået af analysen, italesætter håndbogen to former for kvalitet: Faglig kvalitet og kvalitet, hvor patientrepræsentanten forbindes med sidstnævnte. Begrebets essens italesættes mindre tydeligt end de ønskede effekter af patientrepræsentantens indsats. Her lægges der især vægt på patientrepræsentantens mulighed for at forbedre behandlingsvilkår for øvrige patienter samt sikre resourcesvage patienter en stemme. Gennem disse italesættelser konstrueres patienten som relationsorienteret, socialt ansvarlig filantrop.

Patientrepræsentantens rolle og agentskab konstrueres gennem den samtidige beskrivelse af sundhedsvæsenet som et udfordrende, problemfyldt og potentielt grænseoverskridende sted, hvor patientrepræsentanten har brug for karaktertræk som vedholdenhed og viljefasthed for at passe på sig selv og gøre sin indflydelse gældende. Gennem direktivt formulerede testimonials opfordres pa-

tientrepræsentanten til at håndtere udfordringerne gennem dialog og konstruktiv samarbejdsvillighed. Det ekspliciteres, at den største begrænsning ligger hos patientrepræsentanten selv. Ansvar for at få indflydelse placeres således hos patientrepræsentanten gennem kategorisk berettigelse.

Kastes et samlet blik på den kategorisering, berettigelse og anvendelsen af interpretive repertoires synes der i konstruktionen af patientrepræsentantens rolle at være signifikante ligheder med måden hvorpå helteskikkelser beskrives. Dette gælder såvel på det situationelle plan som de karakteregenskaber, der italesættes som afgørende for at kunne udfylde rollen. Der kan således argumenteres for, at patientrepræsentanten konstrueres som hverdagshelt – en systemkriger, der gennem karakterstyrke og fredelige midler søger indflydelse i en udfordrende verden for at give stemme og forbedrede vilkår til især sine ressourcetsvage medpatienter. At denne helteskikkelse opstår netop i disse år ser desuden ud til at være en afspejling af de politiske og samfundsøkonomiske udfordringer og ambitioner, som sundhedsvæsenet står i. Samtidig ser det ud til, at heltekonstruktionen ændrer på ansvarsgeografien i samspillet mellem borger og sundhedsvæsen. Hvor en patient i traditionel forstand er en, der har behov for hjælp, er helten i stand til at hjælpe både sig selv og andre. Man kan således også argumentere for, at konstruktionen af helteskikkelsen tildeler borgeren et større ansvar for egen behandling og medborgeres behandling.

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