

Mediality

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1. Introduction

The heroic becomes manifest in representations. In order to be socially effective, the heroic has to be articulated and communicated, and medialisation is therefore important for transmitting ideas of the heroic.[1] Media and cultural studies assume that media contribute actively to the creation of meaning and that media have a dynamic of their own in the constitution of the heroic.[2] The contribution of mediality to meanings and effects of the heroic is particularly strong in *imaginative* and *artistic* portrayals. Such representations not only serve social self-observation and self-interpretation,[3] they also have the potential to remodel or even redefine notions of the heroic. The mediality of a particular representation can even disrupt traditions and thus contribute to the transformation of [heroizations](#) and [heroisms](#).

Each media product (a narrative, an image, a comic, a play, a video game, etc.) co-constructs and filters the particular figuration of the heroic through its inherent technical and historical specifics. The medium in which the portrayal occurs affects the form in which the heroic is aesthetically configured. Social and personal figurations, aesthetic form and media are interdependent in the creation of meanings of the heroic.

Regarding the mediality of the heroic, one must consider a multitude of historical and contemporary media, including their respective technical and social prerequisites (dispositives) and intermedial relationships. According to common definitions, a *medium* is any kind of channel used to communicate information of a symbolic kind through a material or technological device that is external to the human body.[4] Communication and media studies tend to exclude the human body as medium, but this is contentious, and some approaches include 'human media' (the body, the voice).[5] Regarding the heroic, this is particularly expedient as it is significantly defined by physical action and [corporeality](#): heroic figures embody [heroic qualities](#), charisma and presence in their appearance, body language and habitus.

The mediality of the heroic can only be described comprehensively by drawing on a combination of theoretical approaches, which are summarised here. Then, an introduction to the concept of 'affordance' provides a productive approach for studying specific 'media forms' in which the heroic is represented.

2. Theoretical framework

The semiotics of culture understands and describes cultures and their objectifications as "systems of semiotic systems";[6] it offers a fundamental approach to the composition of meanings of the heroic. It directs attention to the agencies, cultural archives and processes of communication that are involved in heroizations within a society. In a specific culture, *codes* function as rule-based connections between meanings and medialised forms of articulation. Ideas of the heroic are encoded by cultural *conventions* that are subject to change but can also be passed down as *traditions* to following generations.[7]

Essential for the heroic and its impact is also the fact that meanings emerge outside of linguistic and conceptual codifications; this creates extra levels of meaning that elude clear interpretation and legibility. The appellative and affective character of the heroic, as well as the 'radiance' of heroic figures, are based on such semantic surplus. The heroic as a meaningful element is distinguished precisely by its ability to oscillate between conceptual comprehensibility and ineffability or 'emergence'[8]. *Heroes* make an impact through 'embodiment' and through their 'aura'. Their influence unfolds through their immediate 'presence'[9] and aesthetic intensity rather than through conceptual signification. To a considerable extent, this is an effect of mediality and the materiality of media. The characteristics of different media influence how the heroic can be represented, and they determine how intensely the *attractiveness* and *affectivity* of the heroic can be expressed. This phenomenon can be described by the concept of affordances.

3. The affordances of media and forms

Affordance denotes a specific potential inherent to or implied within a form or a certain range of possibilities.[10] The term was coined by the developmental psychologist James J. Gibson[11] and refers to the possible actions of interacting individuals that are suggested, facilitated or hindered by certain environmental conditions or the formal attributes and qualities of objects. A cup handle is a typical example: it affords the possibility of lifting and holding the cup. In the field of aesthetics, the term affordance is used by literary scholar Caroline Levine[12]. For the aesthetics of the heroic, different forms (such as *genres*) and media have different affordance structures that determine how or to what degree the heroic is representable and perceivable by recipients. While, for instance, film can depict a heroic act in a temporal sequence, monuments or paintings are limited to capturing a *heroic deed* in just one significant moment.

The medial dimension offers various affordances for the portrayal of the heroic. There is a basic distinction between mono- and multi-modal medialities. While a statue or a literary text (e.g. a heroic epic) is realised in one modality, representations of the heroic on stage or in film fall back on several modalities[13] (e.g. sound, image), which can complement and enhance each other in their effect. For example, it makes a difference for the representation of '*heroic violence*' and its effects whether it is staged visually and physically in a multimodal film with the sounds of battle noise, or whether it is only described in a (monomodal) text. In video games haptics can also be part of a multimodal configuration, such as the vibration of the game console controllers whenever the player's avatar (in most cases the hero) takes a hit. In film, the physicality of a heroic figure is medialised, i.e. presented in indirect communication, whereas the physical representation of the heroic in theatre is directly

present for the audience.

In concrete cases, mediality and form are always interdependent as 'media forms', while there are genres whose central conventions can be realised in a variety of media. Different media forms act as affordances that enable certain ways of depicting the heroic while also providing possible interpretations through their form of aestheticisation. Certain media and genres highlight particular aspects of the heroic through their conventions, codes and technical qualities, while other aspects remain in the background or are simply not representable in a particular media form. This does not posit an absolute distinction between media, nor does it promote the idea that all media are equally effective in their capacity to represent the heroic. Rather, what different media have to offer is structured in different ways. This is the result of both their technological possibilities and the traditional cultural use of the genres that can be realised through them. Representations of the heroic are thus part of a dynamic context of communication in which the producers, the recipients, the structural possibilities (affordances) of media systems, and the traditional sets of representational codes react to and interact with each other, in both complementary and contradictory ways.

4. References

- 1 This article is an abridged version of the German article ([Medialität](#)) in *Compendium heroicum*. For more on the mediality of the heroic, see von den Hoff, Ralf / Asch, Ronald G. / Aurnhammer, Achim / Bröckling, Ulrich / Korte, Barbara / Leonhard, Jörn / Studt, Birgit: "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms. Transformations and Conjunctures from Antiquity to Modernity. Foundational Concepts of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948". In: *helden. heroes. héros*. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen. Special Issue 5 (2019), 9-16. DOI: [10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/02](#); as well as Falkenhayner, Nicole / Korte, Barbara / Bensch, Matthias J. / Hardt, Maria-Xenia: "Heroism – Violence – Mediality. Working Paper of the Collaborative Working Group on Mediality". In: *helden. heroes. héros*. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen. Special Issue 5 (2019), 69-78. DOI: [10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/08](#).
- 2 See, for example, Fohrmann, Jürgen / Schüttpelz, Erhard (Eds.): *Die Kommunikation der Medien*. Tübingen 2004: Niemeyer; as well as Schanze, Helmut: "Medien". In: Schanze, Helmut (Ed.): *Metzler Lexikon Medientheorie – Medienwissenschaft*. Stuttgart/Weimar 2002, 199-201 and Viehoff, Reinhold: "Medienkultur". In: *ibid.*, 226-229.
- 3 Bachmann-Medick, Doris: "Einleitung". In: Bachmann-Medick, Doris (Ed.): *Kultur als Text. Die anthropologische Wende in der Literaturwissenschaft*. Frankfurt a. M. 1996: Fischer, 7-65.
- 4 See Schanze: "Medien", 2002, 199-201.
- 5 See, for example, Faulstich, Werner: *Grundwissen Medien*. Munich 1994: Fink, 29-31; see also Peters, John Durham: *Speaking into the Air. A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago 1999: Chicago University Press.
- 6 E.g. Posner, Roland: "Kultursemiotik". In: Nünning, Ansgar / Nünning, Vera (Eds.): *Konzepte der Kulturwissenschaften*. Stuttgart 2003: Metzler, 39-72, 55; see also Posner, Roland: "Kultur als Zeichensystem: Zur semiotischen Explikation kulturwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe". In: Assmann, Aleida / Harth, Dietrich (Eds.): *Kultur als Lebenswelt und Monument*. Frankfurt a. M. 1991: Fischer, 37-74; see also Posner, Roland / Robering, Klaus / Seboek, Thomas A. (Eds.): *Semiotik. Ein Handbuch zu den zeichentheoretischen Grundlagen von Natur und Kultur*. 3 Vols. Berlin 1997–2003: de Gruyter.
- 7 See, for example, Nyíri, J. K.: "Tradition and Related Terms: A Semantic Survey". In: *Semiotische Berichte*, 12.1–2 (1988), 113-134.
- 8 Fischer-Lichte, Erika: *Ästhetik des Performativen*. Frankfurt a. M. 2005: Suhrkamp, 186.
- 9 See, for example, Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich: *Diesseits der Hermeneutik. Die Produktion von*

- Präsenz. Frankfurt a. M. 2004: Suhrkamp; see also Scherer, Stefan: "Die Evidenz der Literaturwissenschaft". In: Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur (IASL) 30 (2006), 136-155.
- 10 With regard to the affordances of specific media for the heroic, see the more detailed discussion in Falkenhayner et al.: "Heroism – Violence – Mediality", 2019, 69-78. Parts of this essay have been incorporated into the present article.
 - 11 Gibson, James J.: *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston 1979: HMH, especially the chapter on "The Theory of Affordances", 127-144.
 - 12 Cf. Levine, Caroline: *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton 2015: Princeton University Press; see also studies in material culture and human-computer-interface studies, e.g. Leonardi, Paul et al. (Eds.): *Materiality and Organizing. Social Interaction in a Technological World*. Oxford 2012: Oxford University Press.
 - 13 On the modalities of media, see, for example, Elleström, Lars: "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations". In: Elleström, Lars (Ed.): *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*. London 2012: Palgrave Macmillan, 11-48.

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