

# Attraction

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## 1. Definition and explication

Heroic figures possess an *intensified power of attraction*, i.e. they affect positively and negatively, they encourage identification and action, they can be intimidating and provoke not only [admiration and adoration](#) but fear, rejection and opposition. We summarise these affective, appellative and polarising effects in the relationship between heroes, their admirers and the public with the term ‘attractive power’.

Heroes highlight the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Their very extraordinariness prevents heroes from being reduced to a social or political function.[1] However, it is also insufficient to analyse heroic phenomena solely within the framework of semantics and cultural hermeneutics. Rather, heroic figures can be understood as “symbols of presence”[2] (see the entry [Hero](#) for more details). As surmised by Gumbrecht, “effects of presence”[3] have a direct effect on people and evoke emotional reactions. The phenomenon is, however, just as inadequately defined by the concept of “effects of presence” as it is by the term “appellative power of the heroic” proposed elsewhere.[4]

The affective nature of heroic figures is partly due to their paradoxical relationship of proximity and distance to ‘ordinary’ people: heroes possess heightened human abilities and, through their extraordinary nature, significantly exceed human potential. Conversely, due to their very [corporeality](#) and affectivity, they remain akin to humans and thus allow identification. Only in this way can they – in contrast to many other symbolisations – form the model for [heroisms](#) and habitus patterns and call for identification or *imitatio heroica*. However, heroizations are also characterised by a dynamic of their

own that is difficult to predict. Heroic figures polarise; they are never a 'gestalt-like focal point' (Plessner) for everyone, but only for certain groups and subgroups.[5]

Contrary to the findings of a "disenchanted", rationalised world, the persistence of old and new heroizations and heroisms demonstrate the collective desire for a "re-enchantment".[6] Investigating the affective, appealing, and polarising effects of heroic figures remains a relevant and pressing area of study.

## 2. Attraction vs. charisma/aura

In scholarship, the terms 'charisma' and 'aura' have often been used as paraphrases for the attractive power of heroes.[7] However, these terms are only useful to a certain degree. They suggest a particular, inherent quality of heroes, when heroizations and heroisms can really only be explained in relation to and as ascriptions by others. For example, Weber defines the charisma of a hero as a 'gift' that allows him to build an affective relationship with his followers.[8] This carries the danger of reducing the heroic to a legitimising basis of leader-follower relationships. Moreover, since Weber cites the hero himself as an example of a charisma bearer, attempts to explain phenomena of the heroic with reference to the concept of charisma turn out to be slightly tautological. At best, Weber's concept can be made fruitful if it is further developed into a relational model with regard to the communication between hero(es) and the public[9] and if the processes of ascribing charisma are scrutinised instead of charisma itself.[10] The same applies to the concept of aura. As merely descriptive categories, aura and charisma have little analytical use.

## 3. Relational model

In order to explain the attraction of heroic figures with respect to their followers and audiences, it seems helpful to imagine a force field in which the interactions, bonds and resonances between heroic figures and their audiences or adorers can be described as affective, i.e. non-cognitive, emotionally-intensified relationships.[11] The intense attraction of the heroic, which may also turn into passionate rejection, can thus be analysed on three levels:

1) The attraction emanating from heroic figures can be placed between the poles of being *overwhelming* and/or *appealing*. The intensity of the idea of greatness and the extraordinary nature of heroic figures can result in overpowering feelings, which may also turn into fear and rejection. However, heroes can also appeal directly to their followers to take action.

2) Audiences or followers enter into relationships with heroic figures because of their this attraction. Among these relationships are the processes of projection and identification. Through *projections*, heroic figures are ascribed a set of characteristics: As extraordinary figures, they are associated with values and ideals as well as hopes, desires and fantasies. The heroic role model does not just appeal for action and challenge the followers, it also relieves them of certain actions. Heroic figures do what ordinary people are not able or willing to do. This corresponds to *adoration* as an emotional type of relationship.[12] *Identification*, in contrast, presupposes that audiences recognise themselves in heroic

figures and can imitate them. Different patterns and nuances of identification are distinguishable.[13] Looking up to and identifying with heroic figures can be described as *admiration*. [14] However, heroes can also be pitied or be the cause of ironic distancing. On this level too, mixed and intermediate forms are to be expected.

3) The affective and emotional forces and relations can be scrutinised in their *performative*, *media-related* and *aesthetic* aspects. Among other things, one analyse the gestural, mimical, acoustic, and visual forms of expression, the metaphors of radiance or size, the various effects of media formats, *genres* and staging practices that are predisposed to the heroic (for example, the Epic as the epitome of heroic poetry), as well as the forms of narratives and *temporal representations* of the heroic. Finally, strategies of authenticity and plausibilisation as well as suggestive or traditionally anchored effects of recognition and repetition (e.g. in *prefigurations*) can substantiate affective effects and must therefore be a focus of research on heroic figures.

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- 2 Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich: Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey. Stanford 2004: Stanford University Press, xiii-xiv, 17.
- 3 Soeffner, Hans-Georg: Symbolische Formung. Eine Soziologie des Symbols und des Rituals. Weilerswist 2010: Velbrück, 17; see also Rehberg, Karl-Siegbert: "Institutionen, Kognitionen und Symbole – Institutionen als symbolische Verkörperungen. Kultursoziologische Anmerkungen zu einem handlungstheoretischen Forschungsprogramm". In: Maurer, A. / Schmid, M. (Eds.): Neuer Institutionalismus. Zur soziologischen Erklärung von Organisation, Moral und Vertrauen. Frankfurt a. M. 2002: Campus, 39-56.
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- 8 Weber: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1972 [1921], 140-142.
- 9 See Jentges, Erik: *Die soziale Magie politischer Repräsentation. Charisma und Anerkennung in der Zivilgesellschaft*. Bielefeld 2010: Transcript, 75-80.
- 10 Vgl. zu Charismatisierung und Stigmatisierung auch Lipp, Wolfgang: *Stigma und Charisma. Über soziales Grenzverhalten*. Würzburg 2010: Ergon.
- 11 See Shouse, Eric: "Feeling, Emotion, Affect". In: *M/C Journal. A Journal of Media and Culture* 8.6 (2005). Online at: <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php> (accessed on 04.02.2019); Seyfert, Robert: "Beyond Personal Feelings and Collective Emotions. Toward a Theory of Social Affect". In: *Theory, Culture & Society* 29.6 (2012), 27-46.
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- 14 See Zink: *Von der Verehrung*, 2014.

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