Heroization

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1. Definition

Starting from the assumption that heroes and heroines do not simply exist, but that they are a product of social construction, the question arises as to the social, and in particular communicative and performative processes in which real or fictional figures are proclaimed heroes, represented as such in various media and become the focus of a community.[1] These processes we subsume under the term 'heroization'.[2] It is characteristic of heroization processes that in them specific heroic qualities are attributed to the heroized figure (see also Constitutive processes of heroic figures), which are justified with reference to an achievement, attitude or heroic deed performed by the hero (at least allegedly). The attribution and communication of heroic deeds or heroic qualities is often encapsulated in a heroic narrative.

Analytically, different phases of heroization processes can be distinguished: The initial heroic assertion is followed by a phase of positive (especially in the form of admiration and adoration) or negative (rejection and demonisation) resonance within a community. Through cultural practices and discursive settings, the heroization is perpetuated and may eventually end in deheroisation. Heroizations involve

various actors, including the hero him or herself, the 'hero-makers', the community of the hero's followers and admirers as well as opponents, and a public that observes the heroization from the outside.

2. Models and heuristics

2.1. Heroic narratives

Fundamental aspects of heroic processes are the genesis, dynamics and medialisation of a heroic narrative in which a community better understands itself by making the heroized person the "gestalt-like focus".[3] In such narratives, the heroized figure and their actions are attributed with certain qualities and values, which may well be contradictory. The heroic qualities of the figure include, in particular, its *exceptional nature* (i.e. the distinction between the heroic figure and the masses), its *transgressiveness* (i.e. the legitimation and/or problematisation of norms and law violations associated with its actions), its *exemplariness* (i.e. its role model effect on the community) and its *morality* (i.e. the appellative, but polarising effect of the hero).

In addition, formal features and strategies characteristic for heroic narratives can be identified. Often an epochal moment or turning point is focused (*peripeteia*). Another characteristic is the construction of dichotomous constellations in which the 'good' hero fights against an 'evil' antagonist (*agonality*). In heroic narratives, the hero appears as an individual actor with a face, body, gender and biography (*anthropomorphisation and personalisation*); their actions alone determine what happens, while other actors' importance diminishes, thus simplifying complex relationships between actions and effects (*concentration of agency*).[4] Aside from these general strategies of representation in heroic narratives, the formation and expression of heroic narratives is variable historically, as they draw upon heroic semantics which are specific to a particular period and culture.

An historically enduring narrative of heroes requires continuous revision and representation in specific media. The heroic narrative is therefore subject to medial predispositions and affordances that significantly influence its design, but is also subject to change. Various phenomena appear relevant regarding the mediality of heroic narratives and can be addressed in the typological description of an artefact. This includes primarily prefigurations, anticipations and 'hollow forms' in preceding media, which are realised or fulfilled via heroic narratives. Their tradition and recognition, which guarantee historical continuity, is in contention with the variation and modification of a narrative, which form the basis of the historical adaptability of heroization.

The creation of heroic narratives in art and literature frequently employs techniques of iconographic foreshortening, condensation, selection and substitution. A specific artistic or literary achievement is the self-reflexive processing and treatment of heroic narratives; works of art and texts can not only be part of heroization processes, but can also make heroization processes their subject. Fictional heroic narratives, whose ethical licences are less restrictive and in which the influence of aesthetic logic is more strongly manifested, represent a special case. Moreover, fictional heroic narratives can establish two different processes of heroization: firstly on the level of diegesis, when a fictional person is claimed as a hero in the world of narration; secondly, in extra-diegetic reality, when the heroized

figure is perceived as a hero beyond the inner world of the text.

2.2. Phases of heroization

In heroization processes, different phases can be distinguished analytically: 1) heroic assertion, 2) resonance/polarisation, 3) perpetuation and 4) deheroization. In actual heroization processes, these phases can overlap and/or occur in parallel. Conversely, in reality there can also be considerable historical latencies between the individual phases. In addition, heroizations can be repeating processes with the model outlined here, e.g. if a 'deheroized' figure regains resonance via a new heroic assertion.

2.2.1. Heroic assertion

A heroic assertion is a necessary condition for any heroization. Hero-makers and 'mediators' identify a figure that can be heroized, attribute heroic qualities to it and strive to disseminate the construct. Of crucial importance is the situational context as well as the historical and social constellations that make the heroic assertion possible and to which, conversely, the heroic assertion reacts. Of particular relevance are the social needs of the community as well as available models for heroic narratives on which the heroic assertion can be based. The heroic assertion can take the form of an explicit statement (" … is a hero") or remain implicit through the mere attribution of heroic qualities. In the same way, the heroic statement can define a heroic role as a 'mould', which will only be filled by an actual person in the future.

2.2.2. Resonance and Polarisation

The heroic assertion can, either immediately afterwards or after a considerable historical delay, be spread by media and be met with resonance from a community. In this phase, the affective-moral dynamics of heroization exert their effect, because the heroic assertion leads to approval, identification, admiration, or imitation in varying degrees among parts of the community, while in other groups it leads to indifference, rejection or criticism. In this way, a polarised following and opposition of the hero is formed from the initially unaffected audience.

Whether or not a heroic assertion resonates depends on the expectations and need structures of the community as well as on the existence of suitable hero narratives and prefigurations. The heroic narrative can also be shaped and changed in order to remain recognisable and relatable for the community.

2.2.3. Perpetuation

In order to perpetuate a heroization over extended periods and to protect against the danger of becoming commonplace, communities of adorers and admirers resort to different strategies and practices. A heroization must remain dynamic in order to maintain social and cultural adaptability. Such a dynamic perpetuation is based firstly on adoration practices that reactivate the relationship between the community and the heroized figure and secondly on the tradition and modification of the underlying heroic narrative, which thereby asserts its place in the communicative memory of the

community and/or is transferred into the canon of cultural memory.[5]

In addition, specific discursive effects can contribute to the perpetuation of a heroization. *Charismatisation* transfers heroic status into the essence of the person or figure. This heroic essentialism eliminates or reduces the need to repeatedly authenticate the heroic qualities of the figure by referring to a heroic narrative. The charisma of the person alone seems to vouch for their heroic role.

Sacralisation places the heroic person in the context of the mysterious and sacred, for example through the rhetorical disguise of the hero (such as the assertion of the inscrutability and incommunicability of their heroic qualities), through the establishment of linguistic and social taboos around the hero, and through the establishment of a relationship oscillating between closeness and distance that both reproduces the affective proximity to the hero and preserves the constitutive difference between the worshippers and the venerated.[6]

By drawing upon *heroisms*, the hero appears as part of a succession of earlier heroic figures and their narratives. This increases the recognisability and relatability of the heroic narrative and facilitates its transfer into cultural memory. By producing new heroisms, a heroization can become a pattern for subsequent heroic narratives and thus develop an enduring effect.

The repetitive, formulaic, or topical depiction of the hero in art, literature, and other media can be described as *aesthetic autonomy*, which may even lead to the formation of an independent iconography or genre. In a broader sense, this can also include forms of 'branding' through which media-specific attributes of a hero are established.

If the original heroic narrative fails to have a lasting effect, further acts can be attributed to the hero, which can either be integrated into the existing narrative or require a recasting and thus a completely new heroization.

2.2.4. Deheroization

The process of heroization can lead to the heroic figure becoming overexposed or commonplace, so that their effect dwindles.[7] Any opponents, as well as the non-affiliated public, can also work towards 'profanation' and deheroization by undermining the logic of worship, critically questioning it and offering alternative interpretations.

3. Actors of heroization and their relations

Various actors participate in heroization processes. The *hero* or *heroine* is the heroic figure to whom heroic qualities are attributed and on whom heroic *agency* is concentrated. The *hero-makers and mediators* identify a figure as heroic, ascribe meaning to it and strive to spread this construct. The *followers and opponents* are directly affected albeit positively or negatively by heroization. Admirers or followers of the hero share in the perpetuation of the heroization. The external *public* observes the heroization and is indifferent to it. The public's passive indifference and scepticism counteracts the heroization process. Potentially, however, a public can be recruited into being active followers or

opponents.

4. References

1   This article is based on the collective discussions of the Sonderforschungsbereich 948 "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms" and the individual authors are therefore not named. The members of the collaborative working group 6 "Syntheses" in the Sonderforschungsbereich 948 played a significant role in this discussion. The article was edited by Georg Feitscher. The article is a work in progress; additions and clarifications are expressly requested. Please feel free to send the editors any suggestions (redaktion@compendium-heroicum.de).

2   For reasons of terminological consistency with other SFB publications, we use the American English spelling of "heroization" and its derivatives ("to heroize", "deheroization", etc.). Cf. in particular von den Hoff, Ralf et al.: "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms: Transformations and Conjunctures from Antiquity to Modernity: Foundational Concepts of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948". In: Falkenhayner, Nicole / Meurer, Sebastian / Schlechtriemen, Tobias (Eds.): Analyzing Processes of Heroization. Theories, Methods, Histories (= helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu den Kulturen des Heroischen. Special Issue 5 [2019]), 9-16.
    DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/02. For the original publication in German see von den Hoff, Ralf et al.: "Helden – Heroisierungen – Heroismen. Transformationen und Konjunkturen von der Antike bis zur Moderne. Konzeptionelle Ausgangspunkte des Sonderforschungsbereichs 948". In: helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen 1.1 (2013), 7-14.
    DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2013/01/03.

3   Plessner, Helmuth: Macht und menschliche Natur. Frankfurt a. M. 1981: Suhrkamp, 80; see also von den Hoff, Ralf et al.: "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms", 2013, 10.

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6   Zink, Veronika: "Das Spiel der Hingabe. Zur Produktion des Idolatrischen". In: Asch, Ronald G. / Butter, Michael (ed.): Bewunderer, Verehrer, Zuschauer. Die Helden und ihr Publikum. Würzburg 2016: Ergon, 23-43, 31-34.

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