

Affective Aesthetics

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VERSION 1.0 | PUBLISHED MARCH 28, 2024

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1. Definitions[1]

A hero is someone who stands out from the crowd and above the normal and achieves extraordinary things ([hero](#)). Heroes question and transgress the limits of normality ([transgressiveness](#)). They thus arouse an audience's attention, affects and feelings ([attraction](#)): amazement and awe or abhorrence and terror; sympathy and empathy or antipathy; admiration and adoration or rejection. There is a fundamental, intense affectivity inherent in the heroic, and this explains the social significance of heroized figures.[2]

Situations in which [heroization](#) occurs can therefore be described as 'affective arrangements'. This term refers to the way in which affect is produced, modulated and shaped in specific socio-material constellations.[3] Affective arrangements are realms of affective intensity, determined by "heterogeneous ensembles of diverse materials forming a local layout".[4] They comprise "persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviours, and expressions in a characteristic mode of composition and dynamic relatedness" and "bring multiple actors into a dynamic, orchestrated conjunction, so that these actors' mutual affecting and being affected is the central dimension of the arrangement from the start." Forms of expression are an essential part of affective arrangements, not least with regard to heroization.

2. Aesthetic-affective arrangements

In order to become perceptible and effective, a heroization needs to be expressed and presented ([hero: The constitution of the heroic by media and communication](#)).[5] Hence, a heroization also requires an aspect appreciable to one or more of the senses, an aspect that is generally of great importance for affective effects.[6] This sensory aspect can be referred to as aesthetics, derived from the basic meaning of the Greek *aísthesis*. Aesthetics refers to that dimension of a representation that directly appeals to the senses and thereby affects. It is expressed in the form of a representation and

becomes effective in its reception. The aesthetics of a representation can reinforce and complement its meanings, but it is also effective in and of itself.[7] Such understanding of aesthetics follows the concept of “aisthetics” with which recent research has contributed to a general theory of perception.[8] An “aesthetic” analysis focuses on the appearance of a representation as such, i.e. its perception by a recipient, understood as an immediately arousing, sensory effect of resonance. Martin Seel defines “aisthetics” as the sense-guided attention to *how* something shows itself in the fullness of its appearing and thereby becomes perceptible – in contrast to the conceptual understanding of *what* things are.

The interaction of aesthetics and the social in processes of heroization can be apprehended using the concept of *aesthetic*-affective arrangements; it adapts and expands the concept of affective arrangements that was originally developed for empirical social studies:

1. In representations of the heroic, the process of affecting and being affected takes place through texts, images, films, music, things, etc. (*hero: The constitution of the heroic by media and communication*). The effect of such representations is not one-dimensional in the sense that only the audience is affected; effects on the representation are normally restricted to specific actualisations or appropriations of their semantic and expressive potential. A direct impact on a material representation occurs in iconoclasm, i.e. when the representation is intentionally damaged for purposes of protest or when a planned representation is not realised or finished.

2. In literary and visual studies, the effect or impact of a representation is discussed under the term reception. Processes of reception can be observed and their history can be described. Reception studies can be conducted on the basis of concrete statements, if such are available.[9] This is not possible, or only to a limited extent, for representations from past cultures. In general, the range of responses a representation may elicit can only be reconstructed from historical evidence or, in reception aesthetics, through the concept of so-called implied recipients, who can be reconstructed from the way in which a representation structures and anticipates responses.[10]

3. In representations of the heroic, affective arrangements can overlap: on the one hand, the arrangement of communication between the representation and the recipient (external arrangement), and on the other hand arrangements that are depicted *in* a representation itself (internal arrangement), for example in scenes of adulation or veneration. There may be tension between the two arrangements, but tension can also be bridged.

4. Investigating the aesthetic-affective arrangements of a heroizing representation involves its entire communicative context and composition, including cultural codes, horizons of expectation, realms of experience and affective dispositions, but also genre conventions, medial prerequisites or paradigms of emotion.

5. In aesthetic-affective arrangements of heroizing representations, concrete reception settings are just as constitutive as social constellations and they are closely linked to each other: For example, was a representation created for a specific location, and what is the concrete relationship to this location? What changes occur when the representation is received in another location than the original one, for example in a museum instead of a sacral space? Was a representation intended for collective reception (in the cinema, the theatre or in a church) or for individual reception, for example when reading a novel? Are a representation and an audience co-present, as in the theatre or in a museum, and what consequences does this have for the representation's potential to affect?

6. The historicity of aesthetic-affective arrangements is of great relevance for a diachronic perspective on the heroic. It requires detailed analysis of the traditions, influences and semantic charge that shape the components of a specific arrangement.

7. The spatial, temporal and cultural factors in aesthetic-affective arrangements of heroizing representations multiply when the constellations of creation and reception diverge. Depending on how large the divergence is, recipients may not be able to fully actualise the originally intended meaning, or they actualise it in a different way than the intended audience. This is due not only to different meanings of signs and codes, but also to dispositions of the recipients, such as their expectations and knowledge, including the knowledge of aesthetic conventions. Conversely, a reception close in time to when a representation was created can have an actuality effect.

8. Affective arrangements are “zones of higher relative intensity”^[11] of affectivity. When examining aesthetic-affective arrangements of the heroic, one should therefore ask about aesthetic *intensifications* of affectivity.

9. The original concept of affective arrangements does not focus on aesthetics, but considers them an important factor. For example, affective arrangements have been observed to generate affective “atmospheres” or “tonalities” and to constitute a “sphere of resonance”.^[12] This is of great relevance for an investigation into affective aesthetics. Atmospheres are what sensorily brings together all elements of a representation, as well as previous knowledge and traditions, expectations and experiences. Atmosphere is a mood that shapes the communication process, a state of being moved that creates a resonance between a recipient and what is perceived.^[13] It can be described as that which surrounds recipients and what they perceive, and so creates an emotional space of perception.

The elements of a representation are in many respects not specific to heroic depiction. The intense affectivity of a heroic-aesthetic arrangement is often just the result of an accumulation of elements that interact with each other in complex ways. But there are means of representation that have a particular potential for heroization, for example because they have a transgressive quality (e.g. break conventions or create surprise), because they focus attention, generate presence or dynamisms (e.g. in the action, the motion within a picture, or in terms of sound and volume), or because they signal extraordinariness and excess (e.g. through the size of a representation, an elevated style or an effect of radiance).

3. Elements of aesthetic-affective arrangements

The following is an overview of elements that can contribute to the affectivity of heroizing representations. This list is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, but it can be used as a ‘toolbox’ to examine the affective aesthetics of such representations. Their affective potential is determined by (A) elements of *content* (characters, action and spatiotemporal setting); (B) the *sensorily perceptible dimension* of the representation (basic representational modes such as telling, showing, performing and evoking; materiality; mediality and modality; formal-structural means); and (C) relationships between representations, notably intertextuality and prefiguration.

(A) *The affective potential of character, action and spatiotemporal setting*

The qualities of a human figure form the nucleus of **heroization**. A representation imbues the character with heroic features that distinguish them from ordinary people (**heroic qualities**). If this distinction already has a potential to affect, this is further increased when heroic figures are at the centre of the action and have the greatest **agency**. Visual depictions and detailed verbal descriptions can emphasise the body of heroic figures and its expressive potential. The heroic body can be characterised by extraordinary size and strength, by special movements and gestures, or by beauty and eroticism. Heroic **corporeality** is often associated with a willingness to suffer physical **violence** and with overwhelming, often existential experiences of suffering, compassion and pain^[14], and hence with the motifs of sacrifice and **death** as extreme human experiences.^[15]

However, heroic figures also have physical and psychological qualities in common with ordinary people. They are defined by their origin, gender, age or social roles (with consequences for their heroizability). They are mortal and vulnerable, and they show feelings that recipients can comprehend. Such commonalities with ordinary people enable recipients to act and react towards heroes. If the heroic is transferred to things, animals, landscapes or music[16], these too acquire a human trait and thus an increased affectivity.

Heroic figures can be depicted alone or in relation to others. They can appear distanced from others, and such isolation draws attention to them and reinforces the extraordinary nature of their being and deeds. *Constellations of characters* can also have affective effects. The most powerful one, arguably, is the relationship between hero and antagonist(s); it is not only marked by contrast and competition, but can also display parallels when opponents have the same (heroic) qualities, like the many competing heroes in Homer's *Iliad*. The opponents of heroes can also be non-human, like dragons and other monsters or natural forces. This can contribute to an effect of sublimity or enhance the potential for affective identification with the human hero, but also emphasise the polarities between human and inhuman, or self and other.

The character set of many heroic representations includes *mentors* who guide heroes in important decisions and thus show that even extraordinary figures are not above doubts and mistakes. *Helper figures* (companions, sidekicks) actively support heroes without ever being as great as them; they can also have a contrasting, complementary or confirming effect. *Assistant figures* can help bridge the distance between heroes and ordinary people or enhance the heroic character's emotions positively or negatively. *Intermediary figures* signal to the recipients how they should react to the heroic figure, for example with admiration and adoration, and draw them into the affective community depicted in the representation.

The actions of a heroic figure are another constitutive factor of their heroization. The depiction of heroic action has a particularly high affective potential when the hero has transgressive experiences or crosses boundaries (transgressiveness). Agonal confrontations or contests in which heroes prove their superiority are a typical element of heroizing representation. They create polarities that encourage recipients to take sides. This also happens when representations show the moments succeeding or preceding a heroic act. The latter illuminate how suspense is another affecting element, since the question of the outcome of the heroic deed is raised. Adventure is one of the typical paradigms of heroic action;[17] the affinity between the heroic and adventure is exemplified in the concept of the so-called hero's journey.[18] The contrast between a single heroic deed and an extensive hero's journey illustrates that heroic action has different inherent dynamics: the isolated act involves recipients for a brief moment; the duration of a journey, as in the *Aeneid* or in *Lord of the Rings*, enables changing rhythms between exciting moments and quieter phases of action and engages recipients above all through their anticipation of the outcome of the journey, their continuous participation in the fate of the heroes, or through alternating levels of affective intensity.

All action takes place in a spatiotemporal world. If a heroic act is far removed from the recipients' lifeworld, or if it takes place in an entirely fantastic world, this can evoke the attraction or repulsion of the strange and unusual, as for instance in the Heracles myth. If the world of heroic action is familiar, the potential for identification increases, but the heroic also appears closer to ordinary experience. Mythical worlds can suggest timelessness or universality and thus, despite their distance from the recipients' real-life experiences, open up a range of possible references.

(B) Modes and means of representation

The heroic can be represented in the modes of *telling*, *showing* and *performing*. These modes are not identical with genres, and they often occur in mixed form. In addition to these mimetic modes, in

which the heroic manifests itself concretely, the heroic is sometimes only *evoked*, for example in certain music or a sublime landscape. The evocative mode can also have a strong affective force and increase the effect of the mimetic modes.

Narration is, arguably, the most fundamental mode of heroic representation. Heroes, and above all their deeds and achievements, are the subject of storytelling. Narratives (in epics, novels, dramas or films) present action with more or less explicit narrative agents and different narrative perspectives.[19] This has consequences for a recipient's closeness or distance to heroized characters and the possibility of feeling sympathy, empathy or compassion for them. Sculptures and paintings can evoke a narrative through references to past or future events or through the suggestion of motion. Due to its experientiality,[20] the narrative mode has a high potential for identification. Of all the representational modes, it also has the strongest potential for temporal effects, for example in the relationship between narrative and narrated time or through the creation of dynamics and rhythms.

The mode of *showing* is inherent to all representations that require visual perception, i.e. that physically show themselves to an audience.[21] This primarily refers to images be they still or moving. What is crucial in this mode is the direct sensory presence of a depiction – and the depicted – through being seen. Due to both depiction and the depicted, the showing of heroic figures enables effects with a strong sensory-affective character (evidence).[22] Pictorial representation has a special closeness to life and corporeal experience; pictures make heroes visible in their physicality and often at the very moment of carrying out their deeds; they are shown in motion, in poses or with certain gestures[23] or in significant moments of their appearance. However, the showing mode also tends towards concretisation, individualisation and historical disambiguation, meaning that the potential to identify with a heroic figure or the appeal of the heroic may be less direct. The visual perspective of an image can suggest a seemingly immediate, experiential way of seeing and thus also give the heroic a strong presence and evidence. While static images may also contain narrative elements, they are dominated by their descriptive character, which makes qualities and iconographic references beyond narration just as strong as – or even stronger than – temporal dimensions.[24] In the case of a still image, the showing mode enables a temporally extended 'reading' with a wandering gaze,[25] but also a more or less momentary perception 'at a glance', which largely ignores the temporal dimension in perception and thus possibly also reduces the distance between the viewer and the hero.

The mode of *performance* – presentation via bodily action and expression – is closely linked with showing and telling. Here, the heroic has an even stronger, immediate physical presence that is particularly intense for a co-present audience, for example in the theatre.[26] Performative expression of the heroic also occurs in real social space (e.g. in public speech or cultic ceremony), but as a mode of presentation, performance is primarily associated with the stage (theatre, *opera*). The focus is on the actions of heroic characters and their interaction with other figures. Body, body language, voice, costume, scenery, music and stage lighting complement each other in their effects, which appeal to different senses (modality). In theatrical performance, the identification potential and presence effects of the mimetic are therefore particularly strong. Performed instrumental music, on the other hand, affects people primarily through evocation.

Evocation is the suggestion of something that is not concretely present, such as moods, associations and emotions, which are not necessarily tied to a specific heroic figure or deed: "Evocation is neither presentation nor representation. It presents no objects and represents none, yet it makes available through absence what can be conceived but not presented." [27] The evocative mode works implicitly and suggestively by calling up *qualities of the heroic* (extraordinariness, transgressiveness or sublimity) or phenomena associated with the heroic, such as agonality and suspense. Evocation is

interiorised and thus experienced as particularly intense and immediate. One does not necessarily identify with a figure, but with a mood that manifests itself in sounds, colours or space.[28] The mode of evocation therefore has a particularly close connection to the atmospheric component of the aesthetic. This mode also occurs in conjunction with the other representational modes of the heroic and can increase their affectivity.

The above-mentioned basic modes of (re)presentation always manifest themselves in a specific material or medial form, making use of different sign systems and codes. The *materiality* of a representation[29] and its *mediality* have their own inherent expressivity. It makes a difference whether the statue of a hero is made of marble or a less valuable material and whether gilding makes it radiant[30] or not. The affective potential of a representation hinges not only on its own colour or haptic effects but also the materialities it mimetically evokes.

Media are not just the carriers of a message but generate excess meaning and their own effects. Highly intense and complex effects arise in multi- and intermedial representations,[31] where the properties of different means of expression and communication combine and mix, meaning that the senses are addressed in multiple ways (multimodality).[32]

Finally, the affective force of heroizing representation depends on the *formal means* used on both the micro- and macrostructural levels. Some of these means have a special affinity to the heroic, such as the genre of the epic. A momentary increase in affect can be brought about by crossing communication boundaries and breaking conventions, by making use of contrasts, parallels and repetitions, dynamisms, effects of size[33] and radiance[34]. Heroization can also be an effect of perspective. In the showing mode, for example, it can be achieved through a view from below that suggests size or superiority (as in a cinematic *hero shot*), while a seemingly 'unmediated' view (picture-as-window) suggests a direct perception of and participation in the event and generates an effect of strong presence and evidence.

(C) *Intertextuality and prefiguration*

Beyond the individual representation, affectivity can be the result of references to other representations, i.e. intertextuality understood in a broad sense that encompasses images and music.[35] Intertextuality can arise through reference to cultural patterns, but it manifests itself most strikingly in the relationship between specific representations.[36] This can suggest historical references, but more basically, calling up what is already known leads to effects of recognition and, possibly, semantic disturbance, both of which have a high potential to affect.

In many cases, intertextuality goes hand in hand with [prefiguration](#), as in the case of a 'new' Heracles or Napoleon. Hans Blumenberg sees prefiguration as a "singular instrument of justification in weakly motivated actions",[37] i.e. a rhetorical device to create acceptance for actions. In the context of the heroic, this particularly refers to references between a source and a target figure that heroizes the latter and secures or modifies its heroic status.[38] In this sense, prefiguration is an instrument of legitimising rhetoric that can make heroizations plausible. Similar to intertextuality, prefiguration opens up zones of resonance in which intellectual scrutiny of the heroic is stimulated. However, the (apparent) familiarity of the prefigurant (or a variation thereof) can also provoke affective response. This happens not only when heroic figures or their deeds are concretely named, but also through reference to iconic situations, depictions or motifs that have congealed into fixed heroic formulas; this has been shown in the study of pathos formulae (Aby Warburg) as an "intensification mode for the representation of affective events".[39]

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Citation

Ralf von den Hoff / Barbara Korte: *Affective Aesthetics*. In: *Compendium heroicum*, ed. by Ronald G. Asch, Achim Aurnhammer, Georg Feitscher, Anna Schreurs-Morét, and Ralf von den Hoff, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 948, University of Freiburg, Freiburg 2024-03-28. DOI: [10.6094/heroicum/aaee1.0.20240328](https://doi.org/10.6094/heroicum/aaee1.0.20240328)

Meta data

DOI	10.6094/heroicum/aeee1.0.20240328
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Category	Theory
Subject Headings (LOC)	Aesthetics , Affect (Psychology) , Heroes , Heroes in mass media , Influence (Literary, artistic, etc.) , Perception , Reader-response criticism , Hero worship
Index	Authors: Ralf von den Hoff , Barbara Korte Persons and Figures: Homer , Aeneas (figure) , Hercules (figure) , J. R. R. Tolkien , Napoleon Bonaparte , Hans Blumenberg , Aby Warburg

Compendium heroicum

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Freien Universität Berlin
www.open-encyclopedia-system.org

Gefördert von der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft

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