

## Antihero: The Fascination

### 1.

The difficulty of analysing heroic figures is somewhere between that of a Herculean labour and a Sisyphean task. And it is not any easier to get a grasp of antiheroes. Currently there are no extensive studies on the phenomenon ‘antihero’,<sup>1</sup> its genealogy or the extent of its usage, which is why we are entering rather uncharted territory with this edition of *helden. heroes. héros*. In this uncharted territory many questions have been raised: Do antiheroes always need heroes as opponents? In being called an antihero, is it merely a matter of negating the heroic? Are they like heroes in that they disturb order, transgressing norms and behaving competitively? Are they figures that are primarily understood and formed through their reception, i.e., through their narrative and medial construction and promulgation? Do they require a following or even a community of admirers? Where are those elements constitutive for heroes modified and where do specifically antiheroic habitus patterns develop?

The authoritative lexica help little in defining this term. In the largest dictionaries of this e-journal’s three languages, the lemma ‘antihero’ is not often found, and when it is, the definition is often brief and seldom offers any satisfactory description: The ‘*Antiheld*’ is a figure “*die sich durch Anpassung und Ausgeliefertsein vo[m] ... Helden unterscheidet*” (Wahrig, Krämer and Zimmermann 272); the ‘anti-hero’ “the opposite or reverse of a hero” (Simpson and Weiner 525) and the ‘*antihéros*’ “[un] [p]ersonnage n’ayant aucune des caractéristiques du héros traditionnel” (Robert 590).<sup>2</sup> In light of the inherent indeterminacy of the heroic, these unspecific oppositions provide no clarification.

Despite this finding antiheroes are ubiquitous in Western societies today, leading one scholar to describe the present as the “age of the antihero” (Klapp 97). This rise can also be observed

quantitatively: In a Google search of over 5 million scanned books with over 500 billion words (Sarasin 154) one can determine the frequency in which ‘antiheroes’ appear (cf. Sarasin 164). The rise in the frequency of ‘Antiheld,’ ‘antihero’ and ‘antihéros’ may not be identical in the corpus of each language<sup>3</sup> but they are similar if one draws on the graphic realization of the data produced by Google [[Image](#)]. The chosen segment from 1900 to 2008 shows that the term was almost entirely non-existent in the corpora until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when in the 1960s its usage surged simultaneously in all three languages, plateauing in the 1970s. The term’s usage has not waned since. The apparent attractiveness of antiheroes can also be read in expressions of swarm intelligence: The online Urban Dictionary, in which anyone can add their definitions of English terms, reads in one entry from October 25, 2005: the ‘anti-hero’ is “much more int[e]resting” than traditional heroes because, as another author commented on July 10, 2004, “[q]uite simply, antihero[e]s rock” (Urban Dictionary). The popular enthusiasm for this term is especially observable in literature and film (cf. Ofenloch).

But how can we determine what constitutes an antihero? We attempt this via negation (cf. [Bröckling](#) in this issue). According to Niklas Luhmann negation costs time and energy: the inherent negation in ‘antihero’ a priori creates greater complexity while the positive term remains comparably easier to define (Luhmann 201). Nevertheless, the positive term does serve as a stabile foil of reference for any negation because the sense is in no way lost through the negation but merely transformed (ibid., cf. Brombert 1). With regard to the figures of the hero and antihero this means even if antiheroes have begun to triumph over heroes in contemporary popular culture and the positive concept of ‘hero’ has been forced into the background, the hero remains a defining prototype even despite its negation.

Are we then forced back to the definition of the hero in order to decipher the matrix of the anti-hero because it is total negation of the hero? We propose in this issue that not every negation of the heroic results in the antiheroic: instead of considering him as the expression of all indeterminate negation of the heroic, which only leads to a blanket generalization (Luhmann 205), only those figures will be designated anti-heroes that are antithetical to the heroic in a very definite sense. We propose developing this *definite* negation (cf. *ibid.*) from the prefix 'anti-', which has been greatly influenced by its usage in the Christian tradition (van Tongeren et al. 57): for compounds with this prefix, the Antichrist set the precedent. The Antichrist is not simply a non-Christian or pagan but a figure who stands eye to eye with the positive original figure of Christ (Hartman 20). Both share the exceptional sphere of sacred-transcendent; both use extraordinary abilities in contentious situations that are distinguishable only through their classification as divine or demonic. Similarly, we also propose when defining the antihero that he be distinguished from the indeterminate, generalized negation of the hero, i.e. the non-hero. Accordingly, the antihero must be involved in the heroic sphere to the extent that he – in the 'demonic' sense – leaves the realm of profane everyday life, the leisure-time lack of motivation, and enters the sphere of the exceptional, in which he is able to perform the extraordinary with remarkable skills and means.

We intend to link this sphere of supernatural or, rather, exceptional effectivity with the term 'fascination', which we regard as a fundamental element of the heroic. From the Ancient Greek *baskánein*, 'fascination' means the 'evil eye' that captivates its target bewitching and harming him but also able to positively win him over (Weingart, Degen, Richter in this issue). In this original sense of the word, the antihero possesses a 'visual charm' drawing attention to himself and stirring emotions without being immediately understandable. As 'fascination,' the antihero always stands in relation to a counterpart, an observer or object of the charm. Therefore, effect, interaction, function and reception are central to understanding this term.

In evaluating the antihero's deed there is, however, a fundamental difference to the hero. While the hero's deed generally has a positive connotation because it serves a good purpose (even if it is an act of violence), the deed of the antihero is subject to moral and ethical criticism. The heroic habitus and deed become twisted;

they become morally reprehensible, ridiculous or absurd. In imagining a 'borderline figure' who makes the boundary between heroic and anti-heroic qualities and behaviour fluid, it becomes clear, however, how fast the shift can occur from one categorization to the other: constructing the antihero is always dependent on the categorizing subject and his context.

The articles in this issue have been written from the perspectives of various disciplines and look at different medial, temporal and spatial phenomena. Hence, they do not provide a complete picture or simple implementation of this exposition. Some do build on this attempt to define the antihero while others consider marginal aspects.

## 2.

The three papers of the first chapter approach the antihero by outlining a definition; looking for (literary and) historical manifestations or distinguishing him from similarly connoted and related figures. With the goal of **SURVEYING THE FIELD** the papers focus on certain phenomena that are **alternatives to the heroic**. From the perspectives of sociology, literary studies, literary history and philosophy, they approach this previously unexplored terrain and determine various starting points for the exploration of the antihero. While Ulrich Bröckling attempts to typologically differentiate three basic modalities of heroic negations and contrasts the possible figural manifestations in tabular form, Nora Weinelt examines the contradictory nature of the terms 'hero' and 'antihero.' She connects the appearance of the antihero to an increasing subjectification of the heroic and notes the differences between the figures of the antihero and the non-hero. Dietmar Voss characterizes the antihero as a problematic type whose unique currency has become especially pronounced in the modern age – as a critical alternative to the Antique *heros* and to the heroic concepts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The second chapter expands on these theoretical perspectives in select case studies. The six papers serve to take **CORE SAMPLES** of the field and approach various **figurations of the antihero** from the Late Middle Ages to the present. Each investigates manifestations of the antiheroic in the analysis of concrete figures from history, literature and film. Alice Spinelli discusses the varying appraisals of a figure like that of the antihero Astolfo in the romance epics from

the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. She also shows how Astolfo's name encourages his stylization as an antihero. **Amélie Richeux** identifies a notable manifestation of the antihero, the moral deviant, in her paper on French criminological case narratives. She explains the reinterpretations a criminal experienced in the discourse regarding competency and criminal liability in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. **Andreas J. Haller** examines two historical figures from the Wild West focusing on the literary reception of their fatal relationship. He demonstrates how closely connected heroic and antiheroic behaviour are to one another. **Jörn Münkner** compares the protagonists of a German and a Polish novel from the post-war period with regard to their roles in the historical context. He shows the collision of these figures with the societal expectations made of them to act heroically. Two final papers have taken the antiheroine as the object of their study. **Stefanie Lethbridge** analyses the protagonist of the literary and film trilogy *The Hunger Games* in her dialectical role between victimization and heroization. Combining both male and female qualities, Katniss Everdeen challenges traditional heroic concepts. **Heike Schwarz** characterizes the protagonist in Woody Allen's film *Blue Jasmine* as a psychopathological antiheroine at odds with herself and society's expectations of her. Her greatest opponent is the imperative of the American dream.

In the third chapter, again, three papers conclude the approaches to the figure of the antihero by exploring the **peripheries of the antiheroic**. In the sense of setting **BOUNDARIES** to the field, they examine figures that display related patterns to the antihero, such as the non-hero, the antagonist in literature and the deheroized hero, whose heroic status has been revoked. **Christiane Hadamitzky** discusses Ben Stiller's film adaptation of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Central to the film and book is the entirely unheroic Mitty, who unexpectedly turns into a hero. Two antagonists, whose evil eye is used as a weapon, are the topic of **Friederike Richter's** paper on Icelandic narratives about dragon battles. The supernatural powers of these adversaries allow the heroes to shine in even greater splendour. **Andreas Gelz**, **Katharina Helm**, **Hans W. Hubert**, **Benjamin Marquart** und **Jakob Willis** try to theoretically approach the phenomenon of deheroization and then present three example cases. They show that processes of heroization can be more accurately described analytically if opposing processes are also taken into consideration.

Two brief papers, one by **Reinhard Nachtigal** and **Konstantin Stenin** about a rediscovered Russian novel that bears some similarities to Heinrich von Kleist's *Marquise von O...* and the other by **Martin Dorka Moreno** on Neil MacGregor's London exhibition, his radio program on BBC and his book *Germany: Memories of a nation*, conclude the issue.

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<sup>1</sup> The masculine generic is used in this issue of the e-journal. Unless otherwise noted, both male and female denotations are intended.

<sup>2</sup> For the prevalence of such definitions see Brombert 1f. and Wulff 7.

<sup>3</sup> The surprising, sharp rise in French since the 1990s requires further explanation.

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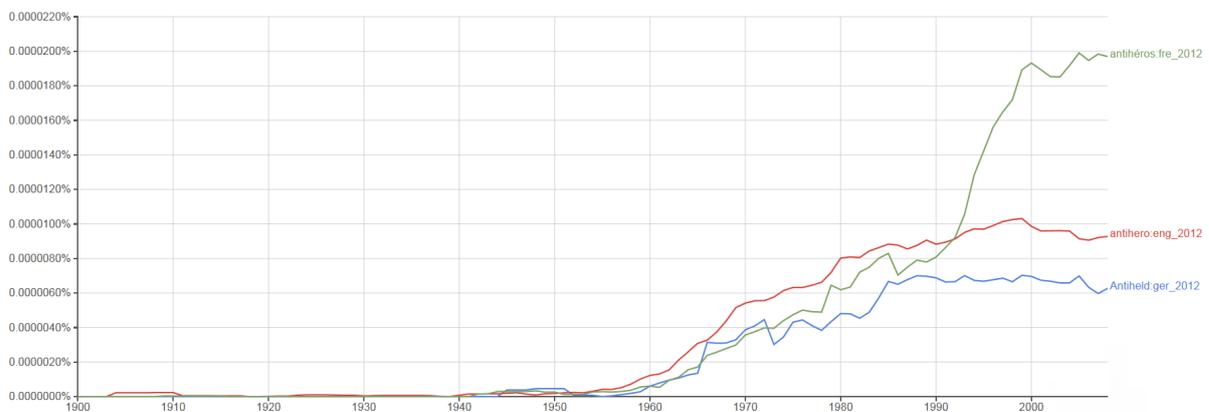
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**Image.** Graphic representation of the results from the survey of the databank for 'Antiheld,' 'antihero,' and 'antihéros' in the German, English and French corpora of the Google Ngram viewer, moving three-year average (default setting), 21 April 2015. <[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Antiheld%3Ager\\_2012%2Cantihero%3Aeng\\_2012%2Cantihéros%3Afre\\_2012&year\\_start=1900&year\\_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Antiheld%3Ager_2012%2Cantihero%3Aeng_2012%2Cantihéros%3Afre_2012&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3)>. The progression of time on the horizontal axis is given in years. The frequency of each term in its respective corpus is given on the vertical axis as a percentage of the total words found in that corpus. Further information on the corpora can be found at <<https://books.google.com/ngrams/info>>.