Construction of Heroes in *Guardians of The Galaxy* (2014)

William Kristanto
English Language and Literature
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
weka95wk@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) directed by James Gunn presents a set of heroes that are different from the majorities of the other heroes, especially in terms of how they develop into heroes. The study examines the hero construction in *Guardians of the Galaxy* by using Campbell's (2004) theory of hero construction as the theoretical guidelines. The qualitative method is used in this study to gain a deeper understanding of the construction. The findings show that the heroes are constructed in ways similar to the stages in Campbell's theoretical proposition. The constructions are also very much influenced by external factors that the heroes meet. From the construction, the heroes in *Guardians of the Galaxy* are shown to develop from characters devoid of moral values, instead of characters with noble morals as frequently shown by the majorities of the other heroes. The heroes in *Guardians of the Galaxy* are also portrayed to have more human qualities in their construction which makes them more rounded.

Keywords: *hero, hero journey, hero construction, hero construction stages*

INTRODUCTION

In the past years, there have been a lot of superhero films produced, especially by Marvel Studios and DC. When we hear the word 'hero', generally people will think of someone with a very good attitude and a very good sense of justice. S/he is also someone who is willing to help people and to sacrifice himself/herself for greater good. Often times, this someone is also a patriot, along with many other good qualities (i.e., bravery, honesty, selflessness, etc.).

We can see many heroes in a lot of movies that possess those good qualities. However, looking at the group of misfits in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014), it causes people to question: do heroes need to be necessarily good natured and have good qualities? Guardians of the Galaxy consists of criminals or outlaws that lack the qualities of being a hero. However, in spite of their lack of good qualities, they are still considered as heroes because they are labeled the Marvel Heroes. This is especially so in their film, Guardians of the Galaxy (Gunn, 2014), where they save a city from the villain's attack and save many lives in the process.

There are several studies that have been conducted regarding the issue of heroism in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014). One of them is Jake Casale's (2014) "Heroism, Realism, and Transformation in Guardians of the Galaxy" where he states that the heroes from Guardians of the Galaxy are the opposite of the grandiosity, self-seriousness, and epic sheen that can be seen from the Avengers. Another study by John McAteer's (2015) "The Gospel According to Marvel" that, instead of focusing solely on Guardians of the Galaxy (2014), he discusses Marvel's heroism in general as the publisher of Guardians of the Galaxy (2014). McAteer says that Marvel has an idea of heroism where an ordinary person with unique abilities and struggles who tries to overcome his/her personal weaknesses and use those abilities to be a better person than they thought they could be. McAteer added that Marvel considers a hero as someone who shares Spider-Man's motto: "With great power comes great responsibility". The heroes may actually feel that they may not be that heroic, and they may also feel that the power that they have is more of a curse than a gift; however, they do their best in using their power for good. However, there has yet been many studies

conducted regarding the construction of the hero itself in the film Guardians of the Galaxy (Gunn, 2014).

So what is the indicator for a character to be considered as a hero? How are the heroes constructed? What meaning can be made from the construction? In order to analyze how heroes are constructed, this study uses Guardians of the Galaxy (Gunn, 2014) as the subject of the study to determine how the heroes are constructed and Campbell's (2004) theory of hero construction as a theory that covers stages in hero's journey to answer the following questions:

1. How are the heroes constructed in Guardian of the Galaxy (2014)?
2. What meanings can be made from the hero construction of the Guardian of the Galaxy (2014)?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS
Hero

The mass productions of superheroes films nowadays make the word 'hero' often heard. However, it has always been difficult to exactly define just what a hero is. Actually, the concept of hero has existed way in the past in the Greek mythology, such as the story of Hercules.

In the middle of 20th century, hero is created to be an example or a role model for the people. As what Boberg (1960) states that "the hero is a champion of society's code. The hero personifies the values, ideas and norms of a group or society" (p. 412). Because of that, the heroes in the past were portrayed to have good qualities in them such as having good moral values, strength, and bravery thus the films about hero in the past may actually be made to give an example of good characters. As Quoted by Trahair (1974), Rank says that "We feel justified in analogizing the ego of the child with the hero of the myth, in view of the unanimous tendency of family romances and hero myths; the ego of the child behaves like the hero of the myth" (p. 160).

However, the heroes nowadays have undergone some changes. Different from the traditional hero that possess great moral values, there are several kinds of heroes that exist nowadays, for instance anti-hero. Anti-hero, as the name suggests, is a quite different kind of hero from the traditional hero if not the opposite. It is difficult to define an anti-hero, as what Boberg (1960) says that, it is not easy to define the thing that has

replaced the traditional hero as the anti-hero reflects the modern alienation that possesses the opposite set of attitudes and actions which reflect the feeling of both exile and rebel.

It becomes quite unclear whether a hero needs to have all the good quality in himself/herself, or it does not matter what quality s/he has, as long as s/he do something that can save other people, or what people usually call as heroic act or heroism. Because of the kind of heroes that exist nowadays, such as the anti-hero, the later definition may also be able to be defined as hero. According to Wei & Xu (2012), "hero and heroine came to refer to characters who, in the face of danger and adversity or from a position of weakness, displayed courage and the will for self sacrifice" (p. 1458-1459).

Based on the previous definition of hero, heroes do not necessarily have to be all-time heroes, sometimes the heroic acts that they did are spontaneous. In addition, from Wei & Xu's (2012) definition of hero, heroes do not actually face danger and adversity all the time. Therefore, heroes will not show their courage and their will for self-sacrifice all the time. Acu (2016) states that "Heroes need not be enthusiastic amateurs or

supernatural professionals, and individuals who are neither are not failing to live their lives to the fullest, or to contribute as fully as they could to the common good. There exists something in between that is not simply a degenerate version of either, but has its own idealized version" (p.204). The unique thing is, in real life, as what Cherry (2016) says, people often claim that they do not see themselves as heroes after they take heroic actions, that they are only doing what anyone would have done in that situation. People often initiate to take action due to the situation when they have to face immediate life and death situations. Cherry's (2016) statement further shows that heroes will act depending on the situation that demands them to take heroic action. However, the occurrence of that kind of situation is rare. Cherry's (2016) statement also indicates that an individual might naturally have the sense to be a hero because of a trigger of a dangerous immediate situation.

Hero Construction

Campbell (2004) divides the hero's journey into several stages. Each stage contains its own sub-stages that cover the

construction of hero in quite detailed events that usually happen in a hero's journey. Campbell (2004) divides the construction into three main stages: (1) the stage of departure, (2) the stage of initiation, and (3) the stage of return. These stages are elaborated in the following sub-sections.

As previously mentioned, each of the stage contains its own sub-stages. Campbell (2004) divides the stage of departure into five sub-stages, which are: (1) "The Call to Adventure" or the signs of the vocation of the hero, where the hero gets a calling for him/her to undergo a journey, the calling might be in the form of information or problem; (2) "Refusal of the Call" or the folly of the flight from the god, where the hero, after receiving the calling, may hesitate to go on the journey due to being afraid to leave the comfort of his/her normal life; (3) "Supernatural Aid" the unsuspected assistance that comes to one who has undertaken his proper adventure, where some help is received by the hero. The help may be in the form of information or weapons. This help may help the hero to be stronger or wiser to face his/her journey; (4) "The Crossing of the first Threshold", where the hero reaches the point of no return when s/he decides to go on a journey; and (5) "The Belly of the Whale" or the passage into the realm of night, where the hero faces danger or caught in a dangerous zone.

Campbell (2004) mentioned that the stage of initiation is divided into six sub-stages, which are: (1) "The Road of Trials" or the dangerous aspect of the gods, where the hero faces trials in his/her journey that help him/her to grow into a better version of him/herself; (2) "The Meeting with the Goddess" or the bliss of infancy regained, where the hero may meet a female figure that the hero may be interested or grow a bond with that female figure; (3) "Woman as the Temptress" the realization and agony of Oedipus, where the hero in his/her journey may encounter a temptation. This temptation may cause the hero to stray from his/her journey in becoming a hero; (4) "Atonement with the Father", where the hero may meet with a father figure that the hero may need to gain his approval. The hero may have a difficult relationship with this father figure that must be reconcile; (5) "Apotheosis", where the hero has passed many trials in his/her journey, thus growing into a better being. Sometimes it is symbolized

by a change in his/her appearance; and (6) "The Ultimate Boon", where the hero finally achieves his/her goal of the journey. The goal might be in the form of defeating his/her enemy or the thing that is gained through the fight with the villain.

Campbell (2004) also divides the stage of return into six sub-stages, which are: (1) "Refusal of the Return" or the world denied, where the hero may feel reluctant to go back to his/her previous life after reaching his/her ultimate goal due to the normal life s/he had; (2)"The Magic Flight" or the escape of Prometheus, where the hero finally goes back to where s/he is from. The hero may bring a reward from his journey with him, however, the hero may be pursued; (3) "Rescue from Without", where the hero may receive help from an unexpected source in returning to where s/he is originally from; (4) "The Crossing of the Return Threshold" or the return to the world of common day, where the hero may finally reach the place where s/he is originally from. In returning to that place, the hero may have to face one last challenge; (5) "Master of the Two Worlds", where having completed his/her journey in the

outside world and managed to return to his original world, the hero finally is able to come back and forth in both worlds; and (6) "Freedom to Live" the nature and function of the ultimate boon", where the hero is finally free to live the life as s/he wants.

A lot of stages are covered in Campbell's theory of hero construction that often times can be found in a hero's story. However, it does not mean that the heroes will always experience every single sub-stages that are formulated by Campbell. In addition, Campbell's (2004) theory of hero construction in film can be seen through film techniques such as camera shots and angle. The techniques of film that are used in this study are further elaborated in the next section.

Camera Shots and Angles

The present study only discusses shots and angle from the photography theory based on consideration that the present study focuses on character development. Camera shots and angles are used in this study because there often are meanings behind the position and the distance of the shot taken, usually the meanings are able to show the conflict in the story and

the interaction between the characters. The meanings can be helpful in determining the stage that heroes are in, and also in observing the characters' interaction.

Camera shots are one of the film technique that deals with the framing of the subject, making it seems as if there are certain 'distance' from the characters to the camera. The perspective of the 'distance' is usually determined by the amount of the subject viewed within the frame. As what Giannetti (2008) states where the shots are defined by the amount of subject that's framed within the screen. However, in actual practice, shot designations are considerably vary. In general, shots are determined on how much of the human figure is viewed in the frame. The shot is not necessarily defined by how far the camera is from the object due to the fact that in some instances certain lenses distort distances. Giannetti (2008) divides the shots into five types which are: extreme close-up shot, close-up shot, medium shot, long shot and extreme long shot.

Different from the camera shots, the camera angles do not create a sense of 'distance' between the camera and the subject. The camera angles are determined by the position of the camera towards the subject. The camera angles are used to let the audiences know how the subject is viewed in the film. As Giannetti (2008) states that the angle in photographing an object can serve to show the director's intended view on the subject. He also adds that a slight angle might serve as a subtle form of emotional coloration. While an extreme angle might represent the major meaning of an image. The angle is defined by the position of the camera, not the subject photographed. Giannetti (2008) further states that a similar subject can suggest a different interpretation if taken from different angle. Giannetti (2008) categorizes the angles into five; the bird's-eye view, the high angle, the eye-level angle shot, the low angle, and the oblique angle.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses descriptive analysis that is qualitative in nature. This study explores the heroes' construction on each of the heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) and explores the meaning behind the construction of each of the heroes. The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) is chosen as the subject of this

study because the characters show a different kind of hero from the majority of other heroes. The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) are arguably devoid of moral values, whereas, the majority of other heroes are usually depicted of having good moral values. Therefore, the heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) may help define a broader definition of hero.

Data collection

The data are obtained from screenshot of the scenes that are selected based on the stages of hero construction theory by Campbell (2004). The data are then analyzed in order to answer the research questions. The first step in collecting the data is to identify the stages of hero construction in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014). The screenshot of the scene are then grouped into each character's screenshots. The data are again grouped into each of the hero construction's stage.

Data analysis

The data that have been collected from the movie are then presented in the table that are prepared for this study. The collected data consist of screenshots of the stages in the journey in becoming a

hero of each of the heroes. The data are then described and analyzed with reference to Campbell's (2004) theory of hero construction. Giannetti's (2008) theory of camera shots and angles are also used as reference to help describe and analyze the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the findings, the heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy are constructed in ways similar to Campbell's hero construction. In general, despite of the fact that the heroes depart with different initial drives as their motivation, in the end, the heroes end up having the same motivation to save thousands of innocent lives. The unique trait of the heroes of the Guardians of the Galaxy is that even though they depart with drives that make most of them only care for the well being of themselves and are not even concerned with greater good, they unexpectedly are able to end up being heroes. Therefore, it can be seen that in the construction of the heroes, the initial drives of each of the characters do not really affect the heroism of the characters. The initial drives only serve to show the background of the characters before they turn into heroes. For

example, in figure 1, one of the character, Peter, is shown as a ravager through his desire to gain money.

Figure 1: Peter is stealing the orb as his acceptance of the call to his journey of becoming a hero

From figure 1, Peter is seen stealing an orb in an ancient site. His motivation behind the stealing is to sell the orb to a broker. Peter's nature is seen from how he decides to steal an orb to be sold later without even trying to figure out what the orb truly is. Another example of is Rocket who is shown as a bounty hunter through his desire to gain money from capturing people for their bounty.

From the analysis in the previous section, it can also be seen that the construction of the heroes are heavily influenced by external parties or factors. The heroes, a number of times, fail to overcome their trials and temptations; however, the heroes manage to keep staying on the right track due to the intervention from external parties and

factors. For example, when the Peter, Gamora, Rocket, and Groot are fighting, the Nova Corps come to stop their fight. Another example is when they are about to sell the orb to Tivan, again straying away from their heroic path, Tivan's servant decides to betray Tivan and cause an explosion that again interferes with their decision that causes them to stray away from their heroic journey. It is unique that the heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy seem to be "forced" to stay on the path of becoming a hero.

The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy show a different kind of heroes from what Jake Casale (2014) mentions in his article, as the majority of the protagonists in this universe share the same traits where the protagonist is an individual who is powerful and is driven by a great moral value to battle against evil. The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy are arguably devoid of a good moral value in the beginning of the movie as they consist of outlaws that turn into heroes in the end. As what Jake Casale (2014) says about the Guardians of the Galaxy that "the characters, including the majority of the protagonists, are not particularly concerned with the greater good; most

only care about their personal stake in the main conflict." He also states that the heroes serve as the opposite of the grandiosity, self-seriousness, and epic sheen that can be seen from the Avenger, another group of superheroes produced by Marvel Studios. And yet, despite of their flaws and dysfunctional group dynamics, they manage to save the universe. The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy are constructed differently from the majority of heroes as if to show that anybody can be a hero. As how Adrian Acu (2016) states that "Heroes need not be enthusiastic amateurs or supernatural professionals, and individuals who are neither are not failing to live their lives to the fullest, or to contribute as fully as they could to the common good. There exists something in between that is not simply a degenerate version of either, but has its own idealized version" (p.204).

The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy also seem to have more of human qualities than other heroes which makes them more rounded characters and also more relatable to real people. There are a number of times where the heroes, similar to normal people, fail to overcome their temptation by themselves, they seem to always fail to

fulfill their earthly desire because of the external party. Such as what the team do in the figure 2 at the collector's place.

Figure 2: Peter, Gamora, Rocket, and Groot, tempted by the money, decide to sell the orb for quite a high price for their own desire.

In figure 2, Peter, Gamora, Rocket, and Groot is seen trying to sell the orb for a high price to the collector. Even after the collector reveals that inside the orb is an omnipotent stone that could wipe out an entire civilization in an instant, they still insist on selling the orb. This scene shows how they easily are tempted by their desire and greed similar to how human normally are. As what Casale (2014) says that the majority of the cast in this film might be extraterrestrials, but they come off as far more human than the majority of the other superhero. This might make the heroes seems to be less great compared to other heroes; however, this makes them more relatable to

common people. As have been stated by Casale (2014) where he believes that the heroes in the Guardians of the Galaxy create a special resonance with the viewer as it shows why our cultures are actually quite close to the central ideas of the superhero genre. That the heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy shows how identifiable they are as real people, but still, within their limitations, are able to perform an incredible act of courage. Casale says something similar to what Gargett (2004) mentions as the definition of heroism by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "an act of courage or bravery beyond the capacity of most ordinary people; an action in which an individual, through extraordinary efforts extends himself/herself – physically, mentally, or in some other way – so far that admiration or wonder are produced in others" (p.10). The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy are shown relatable as real people, who are able to perform an extraordinary feat to save thousands of life despite of their limitation in both physically and mentally.

From the discussions, it can be seen that the construction gives new meanings to the word 'hero'. In this context, a hero can be defined as someone who within his/her limitation, both mentally and physically, risks his/her own safety to save the lives of other people. Despite whether the characters already possess good moral value in the beginning of the movie or not, the characters can be deemed as heroes as long as they do virtuous deeds in which they are willing to sacrifice themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

The Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) shows that heroes are not born, but constructed. This movie shows how normal individuals, with every limitation that they have, are also able to become heroes and save thousands of innocent lives. The constructions are also very influenced by external factors, such as the people they met and the items they possess. The external factors can affect the construction in various ways, such as causing an unexpected turn of events to keep the characters from straying away from their journey in becoming a hero. This movie also shows that heroes do not necessarily have to be full-time heroes. Every single individual can perform a heroic action in time when they need to.

The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) are also portrayed to have more human qualities that make them more relatable to real people. The heroes are shown to be quite easy to get caught in the temptation to the earthly desire, such as gaining money. The other human quality that can be seen from the heroes is that each of the heroes has the selfish side of them. The heroes are seen clashing with each other at times due to the differences in either their opinion or priorities.

In general, the Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) is a movie worth watching as it presents a different kind of heroes from the majorities of other heroes. The heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) consists of outlaws that turn into heroes. Despite of the lack of good moral values, the heroes in Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) still managed to be able to save thousands of innocent lives. The lack of good moral values in the heroes show and emphasize the fact that heroes need not to always be someone with a perfectly good set of personalities but instead, everyone can be a hero when in need. The way that the heroes are made to be relatable to real people may also

encourage people to do good deeds no matter who they are.

REFERENCES

Acu, A. (2016). Time to work for a living: The Marvel Cinematic Universe and the organized superhero. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *44*(4), 195-205.

Adamson, A. (Director). (2005). *The chronicles of narnia: The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* [Motion picture]. United States: Buena Vista.

Boberg, J. T. (1960). The missionary as anti-hero. *Practical Anthropology*, *7*(4), 411-421. doi:10.1177/009182967900700402

Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2010). *Film art: An introduction* (8th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hili.

Box Office Mojo. (2017). Guardians of the galaxy. Retrieved from http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=marvel2014a.htm

Branagh, K. (Director). (2011). *Thor* [Motion picture]. United States: Paramount.

Campbell, J. (2004). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Casale, J. (2014). Heroism, realism, and transformation in guardians of the galaxy. *A Journal of Christian Thought*. Retrieved from http://www.dartmouthapologia.org/apologia/heroism-realism-and-transformation-in-guardians-of-the-galaxy/

Cherry, K. (2016, July 12). The psychology of heroism: Are heroes born or made?. Retrieved from https://www.verywell.com/the-psychology-of-heroism-2795905

DeBlois, D., & Sanders, C. (Directors). (2010). *How to train your dragon* [Motion picture]. United States: Dreamworld.

Derrickson, S. (Director). (2016). *Doctor strange* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney.

Gargett, G. (2004). *Heroism and passion in literature.* Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Giannetti, L. (2008). *Understanding movies* (11th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice hall.

Gibson, M. (Director). (2016). *Hacksaw ridge* [Motion picture]. United States: Summit Entertainment.

Gunn, J. (Director). (2014). *Guardians of the galaxy* [Motion Picture]. United States: Walt Disney.

Hancock, B., Ockleford, E., & Windridge, K. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research.* Nottingham: The NIHR RDS for Yorkshire & the Humber. Retrieved from https://www.rds-yh.nihr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/5_Introduction-to-qualitative-research-2009.pdf

Hayward, S. (2000). *Cinema studies the key concepts* (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge. Retrieved from http://thinkspace.csu.edu.au/helenloxton/files/2015/10/Cinema-Studies-Key-Concepts-1-289afca.pdf

Heintz, K., & Stracey, M. (2006). *Through the lens: Reading film text in the English classroom.* Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press.

Israelite, D. (Director). (2017). *Power rangers* [Motion picture]. United States: Lionsgate.

Jackson, P. (Director). (2012). *The hobbit: An unexpected journey* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom: Warner brothers UK.

Johnston, J. (Director). (2011). *Captain america: The first avenger* [Motion picture]. Paramount.

Kosinski, J. (Director). (2010). *Tron: Legacy* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney.

McAteer, J. (2015). The gospel according to Marvel. *Christian Research Journal, 38*(3), 1-9. Retrieved from http://www.equip.org/article/gospel-according-marvel/

Peitz, W. (2013). *Captain america: The epitome of american values and identity.* (Undergraduate's thesis). Retrieved from http://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=senior_theses

Raimi, S. (Director). (2002). *Spider-Man* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures.

Raimi, S. (Director). (2007). *Spider-Man 3* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures.

Stevenson, J., & Osborne, M. (Directors). (2008). *Kung fu panda* [Motion picture]. United States: Paramount.

Trahair, R. C. (1974). A psychological study of the modern hero: The case of James Bond. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 8*(3), 155-165. doi:10.3109/0004867740915979

Vaughn, M. (Director). (2010). *Kick-Ass* [Motion picture]. United States: Lionsgate.

Vaughn, M. (Director). (2014). *Kingsman: The secret service* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom: Twentieth Century Fox.

Wei, X., & Xu, J. (2012). A comparative study on heroism in shooter and

water margin. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2*(7), 1458-1464.

Yates, D. (Director). (2011). *Harry Potter and the deathly hallows – part 2* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom: Warner brothers.

Zwart, H. (Director). (2013). *The mortal instruments: City of bones* [Motion picture]. Canada: Entertainment One.