The Hybrid Hero: A Contagious Counterexample

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Abstract

Fictional heroes have been considered as moral exemplars and as entertaining and soothing characters. Their creators, however, do not work in a vacuum. Therefore, the emergence of heroic narratives is closely connected to a specific space and time context. In this article, I propose a heroic cycle which consist of three different heroic types creators use to cope with events in reality. This cycle consists of the classic hero, the flawed hero, and the contemporary (post 9/11) type of hero which will be defined and described as a hybrid hero. This hybrid hero became very popular in recent years and just as its counterpart, the franchised hero tries with a specific set of characteristics and moral frameworks, to provide a jouissance for audiences (Barthes, 1975). By doing so, these heroes try to soothe, entertain, or challenge their audiences. Both the hybrid and the franchised hero focus on the reception by audiences although their means and behavior differ on many levels. Although the research and development of the hybrid hero is still at its initial stage, this article elaborates on its construction and conceptualizations as fictional character and as moral challenger in today’s fiction. The hybrid hero challenges both audience and creators on empathic, moral, and narrative levels and is a contemporary symbiosis of heroic and villainous features. The text consists of two parts: first, background and contextualization and second, a description of a case study (The Borgia Trilogy, a theatre performance which Van Tourhout created) to clarify the empathic and narrative features of hybrid heroes.

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Changing Faces
The hero is a central figure in storytelling and can be traced back to the myths in which heroic Gods and half Gods were believed to rule, conquer, and shape the world. Notwithstanding their timeless character, it is safe to state that the creation of heroic narratives is closely connected to the space and time context in which they emerge. In a fluid pendulum, heroes take different shapes and forms to, rudimentarily stated, instruct and/or entertain their audiences. These changing contexts led to an ongoing fading-in and fading-out status of fictional heroes: They have been considered immortal (e.g., God heroes like Zeus or superheroes like Superman) or were humanized and deconstructed (e.g., Richard II by Shakespeare or Arturo Ui by Brecht).

Campbell, in his influential *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), emphasized the changing form of heroes but concluded that, despite the constant modifications, recurring elements shape heroes and their journeys over time (e.g., nobleness, the will to act, the acceptance of sacrifice, the change of a status quo). In addition, Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015) came up with a list of central and peripheral features that define heroism (e.g., being brave, courageous, honest, altruistic). Next to these universal features, each heroic type has its own set of unique characteristics. This partially explains the existence of different heroic genres but moreover the various attributions and receptions by audiences. Since every member of the audience has its unique background and expectations, similarities between the narrative and the personal life can lead to higher degrees of empathy toward a specific hero. It should, thus, not surprise us that what person X considers as heroic is merely a stunt for person Y.

The (Re)Birth of Fictional Heroes
Fictional heroes are creations and since their creators are in search of impact within audiences; both the social and cultural context plays a pivotal role in how and when heroes are created. These contexts actively steer the creation and/or destruction of heroes as we have seen in the aftermath of the tragic 9/11 attacks, when creators searched ways to process the events through narratives that soothed, entertained, or glorified certain paradigms (see also Hassler-Forest, 2011). Within a few years after the attacks, a conglomerate of
heroic narratives emerged; some referred specifically to the 9/11 attacks like the TV series *24* (Surnow and Cochran) or *Homeland* (Gordon and Gansa), novels like *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer) or *We Can Be Heroes* (Bruton), and movies like *United 93* (Greengrass) or *World Trade Center* (Stone).

These creators tried to articulate the emotions of the audience and some even tried to draw lines between *good* and *evil*, between *them* and *us*. The need to answer drastic events with fictional narratives—in search of an explanation and/or to process the events—is a typical phenomenon when coping with changing realities like the fictionalization process of national heroes like Napoleon or Lord Admiral Nelson.²

More recently, we saw an increase of fantasy and postapocalyptic novels like *The Road* by McCarthy (2006), *Life as We Knew It* trilogy (2006-2010) by Pfeffer, TV series like *Jericho* (2006-2008), *The 100* (2014-...) which in their own way mirror and thus try to cope with the transformations in reality. Dystopian literature as *1984* (Orwell), *The Man in the High Castle* (Dick), or *The Plot Against America* (Roth) saw a renewed popularity once President Trump took office in 2017.³ Furthermore, the production and distribution of over 40 superhero movies in the coming years clearly show the audience’s need for heroic narratives.⁴

**A Heroic Cycle**

In this light, I see a cycle in how creators respond to an event. It seems that different types of heroes are developed over time as a response to cope with reality. The first hero to occur in a crisis will be most likely a classic war hero (a heroic figure who serves and protects his community with nobleness and strength as his central features). This war hero is one of the best-known heroic types and can be traced back to epic narratives as the *Iliad* or *Gilgamesh*. Contemporary examples can be found in superheroes like Superman. Such war heroes are constructed to sooth and comfort audiences; they are responding to an emotional tension and anxiety in society.

Later, the heroic face can evolve into—what I label as—the flawed hero. I chose flawed to evade vague and much debated terms like antihero, Byronic hero, and so on. Such flawed heroes can still focus on serving and protecting the community but dare to use other questionable (and dirty) means. Although the focus can still be on the well-being of the community, the personal needs of the hero play a more prominent role (vanity, pride, egoism, etc.), examples can be found in Odysseus, Reynard the Fox, or Dirty Harry. Flawed heroes take a step back, they choose another perspective, they comment on the events, in this sense, they differ from the war hero.
Since 9/11, however, a contemporary heroic model emerged and took its place in the cycle, the *hybrid hero*: a character that challenges both audience and creators on empathic, moral, and narrative levels. This hybrid hero, or counterexample, is a fluid symbiosis of heroic and villainous features and is the contemporary interpretation of these character types (and their classic concepts), e.g. TV Series as Breaking Bad, Dexter, House of Cards. Moïsi (2016), among others, claimed that with 9/11 “The tone [in narratives] became darker, the heroes darker. … It is not the Good that triumphs at the end, as was the case in the aftermath of the Second World War, it may just as well be Evil.” (p. 28) and asks the question: “How can we not yield to the temptation to put forward heroes who are in harmony with the new times: dark heroes, if not intrinsically evil?” (p. 35-36). It seems the hybrid hero answers Moïssi’s question.

The hybrid hero is neither a hero nor a villain, he or she is a species that consists of both classic archetypes and thus has heroic features like being strong, determined, brave, courageous, and villainous features like egoism, vanity, ruthlessness, noncaring/nonempathic. The hybrid hero is thus the sum of the classic war hero, the flawed hero and the villain.

This combination brings us to a character that ferociously challenges the rules of heroism and its impact on audiences. This leaves creators with possibilities to lure and seduce audiences, to *play* with ambiguous empathy, to present a world where ethical uncertainty and/or moral confusion is exactly what creators are aiming for.

**Give Them What They Want: Franchised or Hybrid Heroes?**

Since creators want to attract attention to their narratives they come up with (entertaining) narratives that, exactly as the myths did, try to provide answers in a transforming context. Such mythical stories not only give humans a place within the bigger picture but furthermore speak out on values and in many cases, use (exemplary) heroes to define these values; such narratives are there to explain and comfort, to connect and identify communities and set ethical boundaries.

Because of its flexible and moldable face, the fictional hero emerges both as transactional and as transformational leader in narratives (Bass, 1990). The
fictional hero proposes actional ways to overcome obstacles and, in many cases, represents an exemplary moral paradigm.\textsuperscript{5}

Once the emotional anxieties after 9/11 started to abate, heroes developed in two significant ways: first, a major shift toward exemplary franchised heroes (clear-cut war heroes) and, second, the emergence of counterexemplary, hybrid heroes.

Fictional mafia boss Tony Soprano paved the way for popular hybrid heroes like Dexter, (a traumatized serial killer with his personal moral code), Walter White (a teacher diagnosed with cancer takes audiences along his downward spiral from cancer patient to drug lord) or Frank Underwood (a Machiavellian politician who unleashes the darkest human vices to become president).\textsuperscript{6}

In their search for empathy with audiences and their ways to make sense of a world in transformation, both heroic types make use of the mentioned universal features but their normative frameworks are constructed in totally different and challenging ways.\textsuperscript{7}

Hybrid Heroes as Counterexamples

Fictional counterexamples have been labelled as antiheroes, Byronic heroes, or heroic villains.\textsuperscript{8} I have proposed the term hybrid hero because it emphasizes the sum of elements that lead to a profound symbiosis between hero and villain (rather than a hero with flaws or vices). This hybrid hero is a challenging counterexample for audiences and a tool for creators to reflect on heroism and morality in narratives. The label hybrid hero draws from Bakhtin who describes hybridization as “a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousness, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor (1981, p. 358).

The Impact of the Hybrid Hero on the Audience

In terms of the audience, the interplay between heroic and villainous features leads to ambiguous empathy and strong reactions from audience members since controversial and polarizing opinions are what creators of hybrid heroes look for. Hybrid heroes actively raise questions on the function and means of narratives and bring morality back to the center of narratives.\textsuperscript{9} Moreover, audiences are more open toward narratives and willingly accept deeper levels of emotion, action, and/or violence in fiction than in real life or as Goethals (personal communication, June 18, 2015) stated, audiences perceive characters “in a more extreme fashion, because they are typically less complicated,
and of course are drawn favorably. But fictional villains are seen as worse than real ones.” In other words, audiences are prepared to give in on ethics—because it is fiction—a reality the hybrid hero gratefully accepts to playfully corrupt its audience.

Such counterexamples, fallen angels or devils in disguise, evoke—perhaps surprisingly—enjoyment and empathy due to their hybrid nature. They follow wrong moralities in a good heroic way, or, they aspire good causes through wrong behavior. The fact that hybrid heroes evoke empathy clearly sets them apart from the classic villain, who can incite enjoyment but not necessarily empathy. For example, Shakespeare’s much-loved villain, Richard III, is enjoyed by most audiences but does not necessarily evoke empathy. Through the character of Richard III, Shakespeare creates a self-declared underdog who speaks of himself as being “Deformed, unfinish’d, sent before my time, into this breathing world, scarce half made up. And that so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I halt by them” (Davison, 1996).10

Most audiences will be able to develop sympathy for Richard and his quest for power, but because of his villainous thoughts and means (e.g., killing children), audiences have difficulty developing genuine empathy. Richard’s psychological scars and following self-justification do not outweigh his gruesome actions; this leaves Richard lonely, both in the play (as he loses all his power in the end) as out of the play (as the possible empathy has evaporated). Shakespeare strikingly articulates this loneliness with the well-known roar: “A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!”11 Shakespeare presents us with a villain who, due to its underdog position and boldness, can attract sympathy but not empathy (we can feel with Richard, but will most likely not feel as Richard).12

The Creator’s Intent in Using the Hybrid Hero

In 2002, Raney and Brant came up with a moral judgment theory based on the enjoyment of narratives and the disposition theory (Zillmann, 1995, 1998) which can be roughly summarized as: if likeable characters receive positive outcomes and those who are disliked receive negative outcomes there is more enjoyment.13 Raney and Brant (2002) concluded that if “the portrayal of justice is judged to be similar to the viewer’s sense of justice, enjoyment would seemingly increase.” This judgment theory leaves creators, perhaps unexpectedly, with options to develop counterexamples that challenge common moral, behavior, and attribution of heroism. Because a fictional context and a truthful background can (a) persuade audiences of the fact that wrong actions are essential and justified to achieve the goal and (b)
lure audiences into accepting narratives and characters that defend ambiguous moral paradigms. Creators, thus, can invite audiences into a contextualized tunnel vision of counterexamples or hybrid heroes and develop empathy for those they would normally avoid or even despise. According to Lübecker (2015) this process is already taking place as contemporary theatre and independent movie or TV directors no longer necessarily defend the life-affirming concepts of commercial entertainment (as laid out by Aristotle) and can therefore challenge dominant cultural values; examples can be found in the biracial Spiderman (2011- . . .), the TV series Transparent (2014- . . . , following a transgender father), or Sense8 (2015- . . . , focusing on themes as gender, sexual orientation, religion).

The ambiguity of these hybrid heroes and the subsequent ambiguous reception is precisely what creators are searching for. In a provocative manner, these counterexamples play with morality and empathy and focus on the controversial reaction of and reflection by audiences. Such provocations are developed consciously, not in the least to raise awareness for the unexpected and counterexemplary nature of these heroes and their thought-provoking actions.

It is my experience that hybrid heroes trigger moral reflection more easily than clean and exemplary heroes and since I believe that the arts can play a social, political, and thus moral role, I choose figures that will have as much impact as possible (see also Eden & Daalmans, 2016; Eden, Kleemans, & Daalmans, 2017).

**Ambiguous Empathy**

Kohlberg and Lickona (1976; Kohlberg, 1981) broadened the research on moral development by Piaget and defined different layers. Although there has been criticism on the model, it gives creators workable elements to develop fictional counterexamples. Elements as self-interest, social norms, authority, and universal ethics can be used and reversed when creating attractive characters that challenge ethical frameworks. Zillmann (1995, p. 49), who since the 1970s works as professor of communication and psychology intensively researched the involvement of audiences and stated that: “Good and liked characters may have skeletons in the closet, exhibit a tragic flaw, or simply turn ugly. Analogously, evil and resented characters may display a positive side, redeem themselves, and become liked.”

The reversal of disposition becomes a tool and an asset to attract ambiguous empathy. This stems from the conflicting emotions and thoughts one has while being confronted with the hybrid hero; their actions can at the same time feel as wrong and as cool or right given the context. The fact that one
enjoys the hybrid nature of Dexter or Frank Underwood can be considered a guilty pleasure, an enjoyable discomfort; it brings audiences in a state where they love what they normally should, or are supposed, to hate.

The hybrid hero can inflict strong levels of ambiguous empathy and this, among other reasons, on:

a. Ethical paradigms: Audiences can share the unethical wishes of the character—or at least wish they were as bold, strong, or daring.

b. The harmlessness of fiction: The fact that audiences know and acknowledge the fictional nature of the characters (since they are not real, the characters are considered to be harmless, therefore, audiences can behave morally off-guard).

c. The form of the narrative: Since audiences are more easily charmed or blinded by wrongdoings if the hero is eloquent, elegant, ad rem, humorous, bold, smart, and so on.

d. The context: If the fictional context is created in such a way that the character has no other option than to act badly, audiences willingly accept wrong means to justify a (wrong) end.14

The fact that we only need to reverse a few of Kinsella’s features to develop hybrid heroes shows how thin the line between hero, villain, and hybrid hero is. Moral integrity can be swapped for deceit, honesty for dishonesty, altruism for egoism, and so on.

The gap between good and bad is a narrow one and explains why audiences can develop empathy for counterexamples with attractive or emotive faces.

**Franchised Heroes**

On the other end of the spectrum, we find franchised heroes (often war heroes) like Spiderman, The X-Men, Captain America, and so on. They focus on exemplary behavior and follow the punish versus reward pattern conceived by Aristotle as the ultimate victory of good over bad. This paradigm still holds appeal in popular media as it has a soothing and affirming effect on audiences. Aristotle, in his *Poetica*, searched ways to punish villains and honor heroes as he recommended, “one should not show worthy men passing from good fortune to bad. That does not arouse fear or pity but shocks our feelings. Nor again wicked people passing from bad fortune to good” (Aristotle, 1932, Poet. 1452b).

It is fascinating that both the hybrid and franchised hero simultaneously gained a renewed popularity post 9/11 and that both reach large, dedicated,
and often overlapping audiences. But just like with every fictional hero, both types received critical responses from audiences and press. It is my experience that heroes reap what they sow: Ambiguous and complex hybrid heroes receive more complex and nuanced reviews, while one-dimensional exemplary heroes are, in most cases, discussed on a binary like or dislike basis.

We witnessed the reception of such hybrid heroes in *The Borgia Trilogy* (Van Tourhout, 2014), whereby audiences responded both emotional and nuanced on the effect and affect they experienced (see also the second part of this article). Although Hall and Bracken (2011) see a relation between a (heroic) genre and the specific enjoyment or empathy, audiences develop as they claim that: “dramas or romances, may be more likely to rely on the evocation of empathic emotions in the viewers, whereas enjoyment of others, such as action or comedies, may tend to rely on other factors such as visual spectacle.” Further research is needed to deduct a correlation between the typology of heroes and its reception.

## Heroes as Exemplary Characters

The discussion on heroic functions seems as old as the heroes themselves and Plato and Aristotle laid out a challenging groundwork due to their opposing viewpoints. Plato objected to the heroic narrative, as it shows a false reality and “has a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters, with very few exceptions.” Precisely, these corrupting powers brought Plato to ban the Arts from his ideal *Republic*. However, by banishing the Arts Plato paradoxically glorified the empathic impact. Aristotle, from his part, looked at heroes in a more favorable way but limited them to instructional vehicles of which the actions were supposed to have moral impact on the audiences. Both Plato and Aristotle, thus, connected narratives, empathy, and their moral consequences.

The rapport between morality and narratives has always been an ambiguous one, as can be seen in medieval morality plays in which the saint heroes were believed to have a good and instructional impact on their audiences. These plays are known for their one-dimensional moral and heroic behavior and their expiration date has long passed. We may not be surprised that such a binary and utilitarian use of narratives leads to doctrine and propaganda in which exclusion of communities is the central focus. Regrettable examples can be found in the Nazi doctrine on *Entartete Kunst*, and the index of prohibited books.

It is clear that fictional heroes operate in an ambiguous minefield: The characteristics, features, and moral impact all are ingredients that are determined by the context. The heroes of our times reveal the inner and outer
frameworks of current societies, or to paraphrase a popular saying: *Show me your hero and I’ll know who you are.*

The discussion whether narratives and heroes have impact, is blurred by opposing and in many cases generalizing viewpoints. Both Nussbaum and Keen have discussed empathy and impact of narratives from a personal standpoint generalizing their own attributions and experiences. Nussbaum (1990) believes that “certain novels are, irreplaceably, works of moral philosophy . . . the novel can be a paradigm of moral activity,” p. 148), later adding “that literature cultivates a certain kind of responsiveness to another’s need, and understands the way circumstances shape those needs, while respecting separateness and privacy” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 90). Keen (2007) dismisses the idea that empathy has long-lasting positive effects, claiming that “We should not assume that character identification, mediated by video, film, or novels leads directly to empathy, altruism, and a commitment to human rights” (p. 20).

I, from my part, see the hybrid hero as a character that challenges both Nussbaum (the hybrid hero does not present clear-cut instructional moral philosophy) and Keen (the hybrid hero challenges the alleged ineffectiveness of empathy).

Ambiguous empathy evoked by hybrid heroes is—in my opinion—an important mean to reconnect morality with the arts and to once again present moral questions to an audience that may have become allergic or reluctant to morality in narratives. I believe that current times need daring creators that speak out, propose, and try out moral concepts, so that audiences are forced to reflect and take standpoints while enjoying narratives (see Figure 1).

**Case Study From the Theatre: Rodrigo Borgia in The Borgia Trilogy**

Within my theatrical work, the hybrid hero plays an important role. At first unconsciously but later, especially since the academic research, the performances evolved into test cases for theoretical concepts and rendered results that led to reflection. The creation of performances influenced theoretical concepts. The vice versa between creation and reflection, the reciprocal nature between rehearsing and researching is one that constantly renders input and inspiration. It is impossible to say whether the creation or the research takes the lead as both steer each other. The collaboration with performers and musicians on the one hand and academics on the other is an essential part in my work, and I believe the combination of both is definitely more than the sum (see Figure 2).

I will focus on *The Borgia Trilogy* (2007-2016). *The Borgia Trilogy* is a professionally created performance I made with Theatre Company NUNC
and partners, which took us 9 years to research and write (as we created the parts separately, and only in 2014 the earlier parts were rewritten to form a trilogy which was performed as one whole). To distinguish truth from legend, I undertook research in the Secret Archives of the Vatican. Instead of finding an embittered and cynical pope surrounded by a gloomy family, I found a man who loved life and enjoyed the tactical game of plotting. Gregorovius (1968) wrote:

In him [Rodrigo] neither ambition nor the desire for power, which, in the majority of rulers, is the motive of their crimes, was the cause of his evil deeds. Nor was it hate of his fellows, nor cruelty, nor yet a vicious pleasure in doing evil. It was, however, his sensuality and also his love for his children—one of the noblest of human sentiments. [ . . . ] we have ever before us the cheerful, active man of the world. (p. 290)

*The Borgia Trilogy* tells the story of Pope Rodrigo Borgia and his family, who lived in the Vatican from 1492 till 1503: During this period, the family committed every sin God forbade with unique gusto and boldness. Their focus was solely on gaining and holding more and more power; they even

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*Figure 1.* The *Borgia Trilogy*, copyright NUNC & Bram Vandevire. Rodrigo Borgia during the conclave trying to outwit his opponent della Rovere with vulgar humor—First scene of Part I: Homo Carnale.17
inspired Machiavelli’s concept that the end justifies the means. The Borgia weaved their web around their enemies and soon gained a reputation for their lavish parties, their sensuality but also for their ruthlessness and their determination to hold power. The Borgia family raped and murdered their way through society but seemed to be indifferent to reactions or condemnations from outsiders. Rodrigo was constantly on the lookout for opportunities and used his children as merchandise in marriages and alliances. He learned his children how to lure, seduce, and finally outwit the others. It was only when Cesare, Rodrigo’s son, stood up against his father that the Borgia Empire fell apart.

Rather than judging these Borgia monsters, we chose to glorify them as picaresque characters. Therefore, we equipped the family with features as wit, eloquence, tactical genius, humor, sensuality, and so on. These features are known to attract admiration but furthermore enhance the status and appreciation of the characters. By doing so, we lured audiences into a dark but inviting web of atrocities (like bribery, adultery, murder, and incest).

Due to the form and context the hybrid hero was conceived. We created a clownesque world and a context in which the Borgia felt obliged to react brutally and ruthlessly. This combination of an entertaining grotesque form

Figure 2. The Borgia Trilogy, copyright NUNC & Bram Vandeveire. Della Rovere is interviewed, he is intimidated which is precisely what the Borgia aim for—Part III: Homo Solo.
and a context of necessity made audiences gloat. They chose sides with the Borgia although they witnessed a series of brutal killings and a gut wrenching incestuous rape. Because of the heroic features the villainous actions got snowed under in a twirl of gruesome and pleasurable scenes enabling audiences to share unethical and malicious pleasure in an alleged, harmless way. This resulted in a forgiving audience that chose to neglect the consequences of their jouissance. The Borgia Trilogy paradoxically proved that the moral judgment theory of Raney and Brant (2002) is a tool to challenge audiences on their moral values: The Borgia context and actions persuaded and lured audiences into accepting Borgia moralities. The audience is invited into a contextualized tunnel and is therefore able to develop empathy for characters and/or values it would normally not feel empathic with (see Figure 3).

To enhance the empathic rapport Rodrigo, now and then, shared his doubts and fears through emotional monologues in which he admitted his wrongdoings. This reassured audiences that Rodrigo was no monster, as he regretted his actions and behavior. Instead, he led audiences to believe that he was forced by necessity to act as he did, to preserve and safeguard his family. We misused remorse as a tool to gain empathy and understanding from the audiences. What audiences seemed to forget though, is that the remorse was not so much moral but practical. Rodrigo was saddened because his plans did not work out as intended. Nevertheless, audiences forgave Rodrigo due to these shameless emotional outbursts; the intensity of the emotions hid his true nature and tricked the audience into empathic reactions.

You know I have sinned. Could I admit that in front of them?
I work for my family and they see me as a monster?
If I didn’t have my children, all would be different, but yeah I have them, so . . .
Can I behead Cesare? Would that be a solution?
Do you see my shoulders? Once they had wings but now they are burned.
Been too close to hell I assume.
Every day I hope to make things right, but due to the misery I created yesterday . . .
I must sin today and . . .
Do people hate me because I love my children?
I don’t want to be me, any longer. But can I be someone else?20

We used different hybrid elements to deceive audiences in order to evoke empathy for characters they probably would despise in reality: (a) the (interpersonal)
context was shaped in such a way that Rodrigo and his family could invoke necessity to justify their actions; (b) the Borgia family possessed heroic features (as being brave, courageous, determined, talented, powerful, caring); (c) but also villainous features (as being selfish, egoistic, dishonest, deceitful, intolerant, proud); this lethal combination was (d) poured into a toxic cocktail with attractive and humorous appearances in which the strategic virtuosity was meant to impress Cesare (see Figure 4).

We used these elements and experienced how audiences, gradually, became morally off-guard and through their laughter encouraged the Borgia family. The perceived harmlessness of fiction, the woven context, the heroic features, the boldness, the jokes, the justification, and so on. blurred the

**Figure 3.** *The Borgia Trilogy*, copyright NUNC and Bram Vandeveire. Rodrigo Borgia confesses the rape of Lucrezia and his fear for his son Cesare, next to that, he reveals the reasons to go on notwithstanding the difficulties. He asks for help and cries without any reservation—Part II: Homo Fatale.
(moral) opinion of the audiences. Form and context interplayed and sedated audiences just enough to keep accepting the Borgia cruelties. The Borgia family seemed too humorous, too cool to be dangerous (content) and the clowneries, the slapstick seemed too harmless to be moral (form; see also Discussion).

The narrative hid the morality; thus, audiences accepted the Borgia way of thinking without a conscious agreement, in this sense, they were caught in the Borgia web. The moment one felt saturated seeing the Borgia kill and rape, it was too late as the audience had already gone along too far, the commitment and complicity of the audience took place before they realized.

But when audiences returned for the last part of our trilogy they immediately saw how the form had changed: a rock ‘n’ roll band stood in the center of a white stage, the characters had microphones and discussed their behavior in a journalistic, almost in a documentary fashion and academic manner (see Figure 2). When the characters broke down the fourth wall and actually asked the audience why they had followed the hybrid Borgia family, why they had laughed with their “jokes of murder and blood” the audience was confused.
Rodrigo’s lifelong archenemy della Rovere went even further and questioned the audiences on their approval of the Borgia:\(^\text{21}\)

How many people must die? How many must lie in the sewer? Before you stop them?

How many words, tears, seas of Borgia must stream before you reckon: this is not right. These guys are bunch of bastards. Why did you not stop Rodrigo?

You saw how he slid into his daughter. Did you like it?

Did you wonder if you wanted to be a Borgia yourself?

Would you, if he was not a pope, if we were no actors; would you want to be seen with any of them?\(^\text{22}\)

The hybrid hero, Rodrigo Borgia, turned the tables as suddenly his hybrid nature clearly emerged. The combination of heroic and villainous features:
his clowneries, determination, taking care for his community, and so on, versus his vanity, egoism, his self-given license to kill, and so forth, now were out in the open and became the focus in this last part. Breaking down the fourth wall in combination with the rock ‘n’ roll band was both a formal and a moral rupture—as the play was no longer about the Borgia family, but about the reactions and complicit nature of the audience that had nowhere to hide.

The want from the audiences (to indulge in a narrative) and our creative need (to wrap morality in narratives) became pivotal as audiences were in limbo: Was this another Borgia trick? Was it merely meta-theatre? Were the questions of Rovere sincere? How to respond to these questions, as audiences had indeed laughed and supported the Borgia? How to relate to the Borgia now they appeared to be unmasked? (see Figure 5).

Suddenly, audiences were harshly confronted with their empathy for the hybrid hero as their meek uncritical acceptance of the Borgia family became crystal clear. The impact of hybrid heroes was laid out for everyone in the audience: They had witnessed and enjoyed the narrative but had failed to see they were drawn into a moral swamp. The deceptive allure of narratives had tricked them as they were lured in by so-called harmless fiction and because of that had followed a hybrid hero. And rather than judging the fictional characters, we questioned audiences on their behavior, a countermove (see Figure 6).

Judging from the reviews, we can assume that the hybridity, the counter-example, and the reversal in Part III did have an impact. The critics wrote “on the heart-warming monster Rodrigo Borgia” which portrayed “the helplessness, the monstrosity, the greed and vulnerability of contemporary mankind” (Van Steenberghe, 2012). Other reviews spoke of:

a five-hour seduction, into the swinish world of the Borgia. Grotesque and burlesque humour alternates with haunting images, raw poetry and striking solos … in the last part the performance breaks with historical anecdotes and erupts into a vile rock concert. (Hillaert, 2014)

In this stream of historical drama NUNC doesn’t forget any emotional subtlety. The text tumbles and jests, it scratches and carves. NUNC shows that the Borgia clan want what we all want: live, to be loved and be free. The characters are ready for the slaughter because nobody can escape his family. (Coussens, 2012, p. M-10))

A video registration of The Borgia Trilogy can be found via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEqqNMy6Uu4
Discussion

The hybrid hero holds much interest to me both as creator and as researcher, as it is a contemporary (post 9/11) interpretation of heroic characters which consists of a scala of fascinating but challenging features and thus possibilities. The following chapter will therefore be used to discuss a variety of elements that sprung from my artistic practice and the research.

Trying Out Franchised and Hybrid Heroes

Due to the need for _jouissance_, as Barthes (1975) defined the orgasmic pleasure readers enjoy while reading, combined with the search for impact from creators, the latter could ask themselves what audiences _need_ rather than what they _want_. This brings us to question the function of narratives: Booth (1988) claimed that narratives have a try-out function since they

![Figure 6. The Borgia Trilogy, copyright NUNC and Bram Vandeveire. The performers stand in front of a slide of the historical Lucrezia Borgia. Lucrezia must leave her family and Rome and goes to Ferrara for her third marriage, she is afraid and alone and wishes she could stay with her family although they have ruined her life—Part III: Homo Solo.](image-url)
offer a both relative freedom from consequence and, in their sheer multiplicity, a rich supply of antidotes. In a month of reading, I can try-out more ‘lives’ than I can test in a lifetime . . . we then decide, in an explicit or implicit act of ethical criticism, that this new pattern is or is not an improvement over what we have previously decided to desire.(p. 485)

This idea of try-out nested in my head as it not only explains, in part, the attraction of narratives but furthermore, the empathy audiences can develop while they try out the fictional exemplary or counterexemplary propositions. From my perspective, the performing arts, the try-out concept holds special appeal as both authors and performers try out other characters and their perspectives; we identify and even defend what we would attack in reality.

Because of the possibility to try out lives and empathize with those created lives, heroes can be more than a vehicle for entertainment as they are able to combine gripping narratives with profound and challenging moral input. Hybrid heroes have the capacity to both entertain and inspire and because of that they can achieve more than what audiences want. They can be the result of what creators believe audiences need (the counterexample that invites reflection and enjoyment). Hybrid heroes are equipped to skilfully hide (or show) their true purpose.

Why Use the Hybrid Hero?

In my work, the hybrid hero gives me the opportunity to inject narratives with moral and ethical elements. Not in the sense of presenting dilemma’s or judging behavior of the characters but by accepting and even glorifying behavior that is considered as wrong or at least as ambiguous. It is my experience that narratives can bring audiences into a state of noncritical identification with hybrid heroes and this going along process is precisely what I am after. During the encounter with the narrative, audiences follow the hybrid character into its tunnel but once that experience has ended, they wake up and cannot otherwise than reflect on what and who they empathized with. It is this process of waking up from the narrative that I look for in my work. Thus, first I search ways to lure audience as deep as possible into the narrative only to release them afterward so that they can reflect and discuss their moral transformation during the narrative.

Because in current times, most audiences have become allergic to moral messages in narratives, the hybrid hero is a tool to realize moral reflection while denouncing it during the narrative. Paradoxically, the hybrid hero draws from the classic idea of soothing, inspiring, and thought-provoking heroic narratives.
This brings me to conclude that those (including myself) who create hybrid heroes oddly enough focus on exemplary heroes and their moral impact: By presenting counterexamples, audiences are forced to reflect on examples, by showing inappropriate behavior, their focus lies on appropriate behavior or by showing the bad, paradoxically, the good is emphasized. The encountered jouissance and try-out is a hybrid tool to (morally) enjoy and despise the counterexample.

The recent reemergence and major shift toward franchised heroes and hybrid heroes must, in my opinion, be seen as an effort to respond to a world in crisis; an attempt to make sense of complex unfolding events, or to propose a direction. This process of proposing concepts, trying out lives, soothing and/or questioning is, in my opinion, an essential element of the arts. I believe that the arts can be both a gadfly, a forerunner, a reflector of society and a soothing entertainer.

Although both heroic types try to entertain, they have unique intentions; franchised heroes try to sooth and confirm basic concepts, while the hybrid hero does the opposite and tries to evoke questions and raise reflection. The soothing, even escapist, enjoyment that franchised heroes render is perfectly fit as a tranquilizer for today’s stressed and troubled audiences, they are meant to be an entertaining sedative. The hybrid heroes, on the other hand, rub salt in the wound as they emphasize the ambiguity, the unknown, the moral responsibility (and therefore can be a guilty pleasure and challenge audiences), they are meant to be an entertaining activator.

**The Motivation and Impact of The Borgia Trilogy**

In the end, the Borgia family and their actions were no longer the central moral question; it was how audiences had responded to these actions. The alleged safety of witnessing others boomeranged back, this was—for most—audiences an unexpected countermove, as most assumed a catharsis would take place in the final part of the trilogy. Audiences were morally lulled to sleep in Part I and II and, unexpectedly, woken up in Part III.

We believe that Part III had its impact because of the atmosphere in the previous Parts I and II, and therefore chose this confrontational form rather than the expected catharsis—which is, in my opinion, too clean and harmless to have moral impact and reflection in current times.

The search for hybrid enjoyment and the subsequent reflection was the reason to set up this performance; we presented what we opposed to but packaged it in an attractive way, its final deconstruction inflicted morality in a paradoxical and contemporary manner.
We created a hybrid hero which was loosely based on the historical Rodrigo Borgia, this gave the character an authenticity and veracity audience did not question. All these elements combined answered both the need for jouissance by audiences and my personal search to bring morality back to the arts.

The pleasure of encountering hybrid heroes with their heroic villainy and their villainous heroics gives audiences the possibility to try out—and even identify—with their ambiguous proposals; it leads to a close rapport between hybrid hero and audience, which makes hybrid narratives a fascinating and challenging way to communicate with contemporary audiences.

**Form Versus Content**

Most commercially motivated franchised heroes are created on a give-them-what-they-want base: the heroic form (visuals, music, costumes, action scenes, etc.) predominates the heroic content or inspirational value. This could leave us with empty heroic shells where the cover is more important than the book. Without doubt the stunning high-quality visuals and action-driven plots attract audiences in sheer entertainment, admiration, and awe. In order to allow audiences to escape their reality even more, franchised heroes often operate in worlds that are only loosely based on ours as, for example, in *Gotham*, the *Xavier Institute for Higher Learning* or under the guidance of *S.H.I.E.L.D*. This brought Mann (2014) to conclude that we have reached a postideological period in which the hero “no longer fights grand ideological struggles . . . nor does he fight political corruption or social enemies . . . Yet he is more grandly heroic” but without “any real world ideological agenda.” Mann speaks of “virtual heroism” as the postideological hero looks and acts like a hero but no longer acts as exemplary or for the good of others but only serves as escapist entertainment. Most franchised heroes, in his opinion, recycle the form and characteristics of heroes but do not have its inspiring force.

Hansen (2016) pointed out that the tension, and subsequent discussion, between the entertaining and inspirational values of heroes is not a recent phenomenon. According to Jacob and Raylor (1991), William Davenant, already in the 1650s, tried to build a public stage on which the visual splendor was intended to “civilize” the audience as Davenant sought: “Entertainment, where their Eyes might be subdued with Heroicall Pictures and change of Scenes, their Eares civiliz’d with Musick and wholesome discourses.” Since the experienced sensations gradually became more important than the narrative itself (Sobchack, 2006), the “attention re-focuses on the position and reaction of the audience” according to Hansen. This attention to audiences’
reactions fuels the commercially motivated *give-them-what-they-want* concept but is also essential in hybrid heroism.

The search for impact is one of the few characteristics all heroes have in common. Although the discussion whether such “spectacle makes audiences passive, uncritical and open to totalitarian politics” (Jancovich, 2014, p. 70) will, I assume, never cease, the attractiveness of heroes and the reactions from audiences are tools that could—if overstretched—paradoxically undo the hero from his heroic and inspiring impact.

If the heroic actions overshadow the moral goal, heroes are empty shells who do not evoke empathy. Morality is essential in heroism as it steers and motivates the actions of a hero. Without moral reflection, the unique heroic ingredient is lost. The fact that hybrid heroes add counterexemplary morality, draws the attention of audiences and leaves creators with possibilities to realize a more profound impact.

**Conclusion**

Overtime, the status and agency of fictional heroes underwent formal and substantial changes; leading up to—what I define as—hybrid heroes. The hybrid hero is a contemporary fictional figure consisting of both heroic and villainous characteristics. Hybrid heroes are a seductive narrative tool to (a) inflict empathy and reflection within audiences and (b) for creators to develop gripping narratives that challenge moral paradigms, heroism, and empathy.

As creators react to their society, the contemporary interpretation of heroism, the poignant hybrid hero, should not surprise us. Since 9/11, the world order (how symbolic or artificial it may have been) has been mixed up and has undergone drastic changes and hence the development of the hybrid hero.

The hybrid hero is a sign of the times and in its own—often disturbing—way renders entertainment plus morality. Due to the specific sort of actions hybrid heroes undertake, they try to make sense of a world in transformation and provide a try-out for audiences. These try-outs are not searching to confirm good and evil, but are exactly there to question such clear-cut moral division.

The success and ever growing popularity of hybrid heroes is based on different elements; the alleged harmlessness of fiction, the shared ethical wishes from audience and protagonist, the formal tools of narrating (contextualization, tunnel vision), the appearance and features of the hero (boldness, humor, strength, wit, . . . ).

The hybrid hero functions on asking questions, on disturbance, on malicious pleasures, on ambiguity and therefore searches for discussions and controversy. This in contrast to the franchised hero who lets audiences dream
away, escape the daily chaos, and mayhem. On a moral level, the franchised hero confirms the clear-cut morality of good and evil, of (war heroes and villains, while the hybrid hero confirms the chaos, the immorality (sometimes the amorality) and thus the fluid morality.

Both the franchised and the hybrid hero face challenges in the near future. At the risk of falling victim to uniformity and a one-size-fits-all treatment, numerous franchised heroic movies will see light in the years to come (over 40 DC and Marvel superheroes movies will be made between 2014 and 2019). The commercialization of such war heroes could result in downgrading the inspirational element of heroism, as the heroic actions and audiovisual effects mainly focus on entertainment and could leave us with empty shells that no longer evoke empathy.

The same goes for the hybrid hero who, due to its ambiguous nature, may prove to be a temporary phenomenon. It is, for now, impossible to predict its expiry date due to its clear connections with reality and the need from creators. The moment the reality changes the fictional heroes will do too, thus, the future of the hybrid hero depends on what happens in the real world. (Besides, the fact that hybrid heroes challenge the instructional function of exemplary heroes and narratives could backfire as audiences no longer trust these heroes or no longer want to be confronted with moral decline.)

The hybrid hero can be defined as:

a character that combines features from both heroes and villains. The interplay between these two sets of features leads to ambiguous empathy and strong reactions from the audience since controversial and polarizing opinions are what creators of hybrid heroes search for. Hybrid heroes actively raise questions on the function and the means of narratives and bring morality back to the centre of narratives.

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**Notes**

1. Examples of heroic types: the tragic hero, the comic hero, the hero as leader, the hero asloner, the hero as underdog, the hero as conqueror, the hero as savior, and so on.


6. I choose characters from TV series, because these characters are better known and more widespread and because TV series seem to fulfill the role novels once had.

7. Some basic (and recurring) features of heroes: (a) heroes act at a unique and specific moment in time, (b) the actions of heroes are considered as special and can be admired by others, (c) the hero chooses to act in search for a change in the status quo, (d) the hero is willing to endure physical and/or mental pain to achieve the goal, (e) the hero does exist through the attribution of others.

8. The *Byronic hero* is defined as: A man alluringly dark, mysterious, and moody and the antihero as: A central character in a story, film, or drama who lacks conventional heroic attributes (*Source*. OED). While De Wijze proposes to define this type of hero as a *heroic villain*; see de Wijze, S. (2008). Between hero and villain: Jack Bauer and the problem of “dirty hands.” In J. H. Weed, R. B. Davis, & R. Weed (Eds.), *24 and philosophy: The world according to Jack*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.

9. De Wijze proposes to define this type of hero as a “heroic villain,” but this seems to limit the hybrid connection because De Wijze does not see the villain becoming heroic; therefore, I choose the hybrid hero as he or she can originate from the hero and/or the villain; see de Wijze, S. (2008). Between hero and villain: Jack


12. I define Sympathy as feeling for someone, and Empathy as feeling as somebody. The difference is the standpoint; where sympathy remains an outsider perspective and empathy tries to see the world from an insider’s point of view.


16. The so-called Entartete Kunst was believed—according to the Nazi regime—to infect and degenerate those who were exposed to such works. These ideas are partly based on the study Entartung by Max Nordau (Berlin: C. Dunder, 1892) as he claimed that Entartete-works possessed “the negative effects of modernity” and that they “threatened to spread degeneration further through mass exposure.” Source. Von Der Linn, M. (2001). Themes of nostalgia and critique in Weimar-Era Brahms reception. In D. Brodbeck (Ed.), Brahms studies (Vol. 3, p. 234). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

17. The pictures I choose, present key moments in The Borgia Trilogy and show the differences in form between Parts I, II, and III. Seeing them again not only brings back memories on the profound emotions the performers conveyed but also on the emotional reactions of the audiences afterward.

18. For more on The Borgia Trilogy, see Video: https://www.youtube.com/user/toneelgroepNUNC; Pictures: https://get.google.com/albumarchive/117598957067957812613.


20. Fragment from The Borgia Trilogy (Part II, Homo Fatale).

21. The fourth wall is convention form the performing arts which is an invisible and imagined wall between spectators and performers, if a performer breaks through the fourth wall, this means the performers address the audience.

22. Fragment from The Borgia Trilogy (Part III, Homo Solo).

23. Due to the recent discovery of the so-called Mirror Neurons, it seems that audiences are able to mirror the emotions of performers on stage (or characters in movies and novels).

References


**Author Biography**

**Benjamin Van Tourhout** is a researcher at University of Leuven and LUCA-School of Arts (Belgium) and author/director in the performing arts. He focuses on (historical) heroes and their relevance for today’s audiences. He rewrites and reinvents the biography of historical figures, combining both imagination and research to speak out on current paradigms. He recently created plays on Gilles de Rais, Maria Stuart, Evariste Galois, and Rodrigo Borgia. Besides his artistic practice, he is a researcher at the University of Leuven and the LUCA-School of Arts where he researches and writes on heroism, focusing on the ambiguous features and impact of fictional heroes. He became research fellow at the University of Freiburg (Germany) within the SFB Helden-Heroisierungen-Heroismen project. In the near future, his research will focus on the limits and contemporary deconstruction of fictional heroism.