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Heroism – Violence – Mediality

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Affinities between representations of heroization and representations of violence

In our work on the cultural aspects of heroisms and heroizations, we have highlighted a number of qualities and phenomena that have defined heroism in the *longue durée* and across cultural spheres. The following features of the heroic also have a special relationship to the phenomenon of violence, as will be elaborated below:

- *transgressiveness*: heroic figures and heroic actions operate at boundaries, which they transgress;

- *justification*: because of their transgressiveness, the actions of heroic figures need to be justified;

- *agonistic character*: heroic figures prove themselves in conflicts with their opponents or opposing forces;

- the *potential to attract and affect audiences*: due to their extraordinariness, heroic figures and deeds have a special power to evoke emotions and a power to fascinate.

Heroizations can only be described and analysed when they become manifest in a mediatized form. This means in turn that the very form of mediality makes the heroic phenomenon in question possible in the first place and plays a role in its structuring. We believe that there is an essential connection between the mediatized forms of heroic phenomena and the development of cultural and social discourses surrounding them. Since there are structural similarities between violence and heroism, this connection becomes especially palpable in those media expressions where the use of physical violence interacts with heroization.

In what follows, we present a model for analysing the phenomenon of heroic violence. Violence was the focus of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948 in 2017 and the proposed model was developed over the course of discussions in the SFB's working group on mediality.[1] We will conclude with two brief case studies that illustrate how this analytical model may be effectively applied. In this way, the working group hopes to contribute to the interdisciplinary analytical vocabulary of the SFB.

The starting point for this discussion is the connection between violence and heroism in certain situations, a connection that will be demonstrated through the analysis of specific media representations and media products in parts 3 and 4 of this paper. This link through mediatization makes it possible to establish a discourse about physical violence and its relationship to the heroic (and vice versa). **Figure 1** illustrates this link and hence our analytical model for this discussion. The fundamental assumptions about media communication are based on Paul Du Gay and Stuart Hall's circuit of culture model (see also Goggin).

Representation in a specific media form and the particular type of representation direct our focus from the recipient to the relationship between heroism and violence. This initiates processes of interpretation, reflection, and evaluation in an ethical as well as an aesthetic sense (see Hall). It also positions the recipient in a specific affective relationality with the media representation, its genres and technology.

According to the hypothesis of the working group on mediality, the fact that violence can be semantically effective in regard to heroism is a

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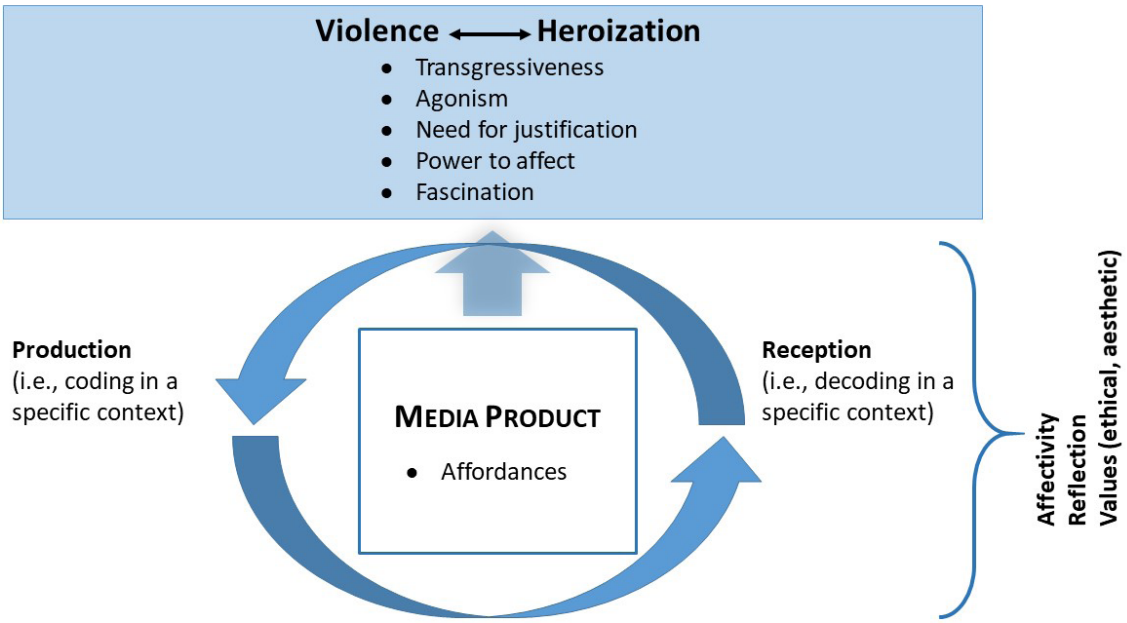

Fig. 1: Analytical model (diagram: Claudia Müller).

result of fundamental structural similarities between the phenomena of violence and heroism. Like heroism, violence is transgressive; most notably, it transgresses another person's physical integrity. Violence also has an agonistic element and its use must be justified. Moreover, the representation of violence can, like heroism, have a certain potential to affect people emotionally and even overwhelm them – a power to fascinate and attract.

Media representations that explicitly link heroic actions with violence specifically emphasize these aspects, while also allowing the problematic sides of heroism to manifest themselves – for example, the transgression of generally accepted boundaries. The link between violence and heroization thus demands that audiences form an attitude towards the representation in question (see Prince). This leads us to the following questions:

- Are there boundary transgressions that cannot (or can no longer) be reconciled with or justified by ethical or aesthetic norms?

- How much violence can recipients accept before it begins to interfere with their idea of heroic greatness?

- Does the connection to violence contribute to the heroization of a figure or deed, or does it have a de-heroizing effect?

- Can violence be heroized?

- How does a certain type of representation determine the creation of the meaning and value of the represented?

- Which facets are particularly emphasized in the relationship between violence and heroism in each case?

Representations differ in the degree to which violence is shown. For example, in the theatre, violent acts are often not shown on stage, but are only described (in the form of viewing from the walls – *teichoscopy* – or a message). Pictures may also omit the moment of violence, depicting the moment before or after a violent act instead. Based on this, the following questions arise:

- What intentions and implicit norms can we assume when explicit representations of violence are avoided?

- What motives are involved in representations of extreme acts of violence?

The way a connection between violence and heroization is created in a particular representation depends partly on the intention behind that particular form of representation. It is also determined by the possibilities inherent in a specific media form, which 'filters' if and how violence and heroism are to be connected.

Affordances of media forms

In our model, we regard the actual media product (a narrative, image, play, video game, etc.) as a surface that *affords* us a view of a certain constellation of heroism and violence. The qualities of the surface determine our view and are essentially defined by the *medium* and the *genre* of the representation. We define *media form* as the point at which the medium's qualities and modalities overlap with the conventions of representation and traditions of certain genres.

According to conventional definitions from communication studies, a *medium* is any kind of channel used to communicate information of a symbolic kind through a material or technological device that is external to the human body. Based on this definition, a handwritten text is a medium, while the human voice is not. However, some leading experts in communication and media studies disagree with the view that the human body cannot function as a medium, and some approaches explicitly include "human media" (the body, the voice) (see, for example, Faulstich 29-30; see also Peters). With regard to heroization, a definition which excludes the body is particularly problematic when we consider theatre (on the physical aspect of stage - audience communication, see the SFB publication *Fremde Helden*).[2] Furthermore, in the case of video games, players also become directly involved *physically* when playing the role of a hero – for example, via emotional reactions or through certain functions of controllers that are transmitted to the body (such as vibrations).

The term *category* defines a group of forms of expression that are similar (across media) and share a multitude of key features. The term *genre*, on the other hand, is primarily a literary concept that describes subgroups of categories that are similar in how they are formed or in key sub-elements such as plot structures – for example, romance novels or detective fiction. Heroically charged violence (or violent heroizations) can take on different figurations, depending on the category and genre. Excessive acts of violence that are both possible and expected in some genres – for example, in the classic heroic epic, or in horror or war movies – would probably be perceived as a conspicuous and alien element in a romance novel.

Whether the representation of heroically aestheticized violence is enhanced or constrained depends on the concrete interplay between medium and category. Certain categories can make the representation of violence difficult due to the qualities of the medium in which they are usually expressed. For instance, while a heroic epic or action film can describe or depict violent acts in a temporal sequence, in the case of an individual picture, the heroic narrative referred to in the image must be communicated through the characteristics of the situation or through the characters. In other words, being able to decode the representation of violence as heroic in a single picture is more strongly dependent on cultural knowledge external to the image than in the case of a narrative artwork, which makes the connection between heroism and violence explicit.

Media, like categories and genres, have a certain amount of basic creative leeway. This range of possibilities, which can also be expressed using the concept of 'affordances',[3] determines what form the relationship between heroism and violence can take in a specific representation or performance. The term 'affordance' was coined by the developmental psychologist James J. Gibson and refers to the possible actions of interacting individuals that are suggested, facilitated, or hindered by certain environmental conditions or the formal attributes and qualities of objects. A cup handle is a typical example: it affords the possibility of lifting and holding the cup. Different media forms also have different affordance structures that help to define what can be represented, how it can be represented, and the ways in which viewers can perceive what is represented.

As to heroizing representations of violence – or, as in the case of a video game, the virtual use of violence – different media and genres act as affordances that enable certain ways of depicting violence while also providing possible interpretations through their form of aestheticization. Certain media and genres prioritize particular representable aspects of the field of 'physical violence' through their conventions, codes and technical qualities, while other aspects remain in the background or simply do not correspond to the representational possibilities of a particular media form; in other words, they are not representable in certain ways. While this does not mean that we argue in favour of an absolute distinction between media, we also do not promote the idea that all media are equally effective in their capacity to represent violence. Rather, what different media have to offer is structured in different ways. This is the result of both their technological possibilities and the traditional cultural use of the genres that are realized through them. A prime example is the genre of the epic, the very form of which evokes the expectation of a heroic tale even when there is actually no heroic content (as in the case of the so-called *mock epic*). In regard to violence, one question is why certain media forms tend to depict heroizations in an especially violent way. Those media forms in

which violence is conventionally heroized in an aesthetic manner raise a similar question. The actual aesthetic rendering and the intensity of representational forms of heroically connoted violence are specific to a particular culture, medium and time. They are part of a complex network of visual and/or narrative habits as well as an attempt to fulfil, or subvert, the expectations of the audience.

The form that the link between heroism and violence takes in each case is thus part of a dynamic context of communication in which the producers, the recipients, the structural possibilities (affordances) of media systems, and the traditional sets of representational codes react to and interact with each other, in both complementary and contradictory ways. In addition to the codes and conventions of categories and genres, the modality of media is another important element of the affordance structure (see Elleström). Whether we can actually hear battle cries and yelling or if these are only described – in other words, whether we are dealing with a multi-modal or a mono-modal medium – makes a difference for the representation of violence and its effects. The dimension of sound that affects us emotionally (cries, swords clashing, bones breaking, shots, the sound of an explosion) is often underestimated, especially when it comes to the representation of physical violence. This is true for text-based as well as audio-visual media. In some forms of video games, the sense of touch can also be part of the medium's design. This is the case, for example, for game console controllers that vibrate whenever the player's avatar (in most cases, the hero) takes a hit.

The link between heroization and physical violence can fulfil different functions within the typical codes and modalities of different media and their genres. Like virtually all heroic narratives, the representation of violent acts helps to identify individual characters that have a high level of agency in agonistic situations. The fact that in many cultures heroes are fighters helps explain why the use of violence plays such a large role in the construction of heroization.

In the following, we will apply the analytical model we have outlined to two historically and culturally different examples of the mediality of heroized violence in different media.

The death of Turnus: Epic poem and mosaic

In this case study, we will demonstrate how the media form fundamentally defines the relationship between heroism and violence by comparing two representations of the same mythological narrative in two different media. We will look at the story of Turnus's death at the hands of Aeneas, as described by Vergil in the twelfth book (1178-1271) of the *Aeneid*.[4] The narrative is from the final scene of the epic. We will compare this to a floor mosaic from late antiquity, from the ancient city of Abelterium (Alter do Chão, Portugal), which refers to the same event (**fig. 2**).

Fig. 2: Fourth-century floor mosaic, 'House of the Medusa', Abelterium (Alter do Chão, Portugal) (António 55 fig. 3).

In the epic tale, Aeneas throws his spear at Turnus, the king of the Rutuli. The spear penetrates Turnus's shield and wounds him. The defeated Turnus then gives a speech in which he first encourages Aeneas to seize the opportunity and kill him, but then he changes his mind and begs Aeneas to spare his life for his father's sake. He pleads to Aeneas to return him to his father alive, or at least to bring him his corpse. Aeneas is almost swayed by the enemy's words, but then he sees the sword belt of the fallen prince Pallas (a young man in his army whom he was charged with protecting) on Turnus, who had stolen it from Pallas after killing him. Enraged, Aeneas declares his revenge in Pallas's name and plunges his sword into Turnus, killing him.

The mosaic, which was not excavated until 2007, dates back to the fourth century (about 400 years after the epic was written) and occupies a central place in the floor of a dining room (*triclinium*) in a once luxurious townhouse ('House of the Medusa') in the ancient town of Abelterium.[5] Slightly off-centre on the left, we can see a fully armed Aeneas holding his spear and shield in

front of him. Turnus has thrown himself at his feet, with his hands raised in a pleading gesture. His weapons lie strewn around him. The two central figures are flanked by three soldiers each: Aeneas's men, identifiable by their distinctive headgear, to the left of the scene, and Turnus's to the right. In the lower part of the mosaic we see two reclining figures, personifications that indicate the location of the event.

Subsequently, we will discuss the textual and visual mediatization of the narrative, using key terms from our model for analysing the relationship between heroism and violence.

Agonistic character: That Aeneas and Turnus are the main agonistic forces in the narrative becomes increasingly clear in the course of events in the second part of the epic. Just before the final duel between the two men, this is expressed yet again in Aeneas's poignant challenge: "It is not for us / to race against each other, but to meet / with cruel weapons, hand to hand" (12, 1182-1184).[6] The first verse of the final scene emphasizes this agonistic character again: "In Turnus' wavering Aeneas sees / his fortune; he holds high the fatal shaft" (12, 1225-1226). The action that follows completely revolves around the two protagonists; other figures are mentioned only in passing, if at all: "all the Rutulians leap up with a groan" (12, 1237).

In the mosaic, the two figures form the centre of the composition. Aeneas stands upright and sublime, while Turnus kneels submissively before him. Turnus's pleading gesture creates a visual connection between the figures. The motif of the Gorgoneion (the head of the Gorgo Medusa) on Aeneas's shield symbolizes the agonistic character of this scene. For Aeneas, the head fends off evil (it is apotropaic), but for those who see it, such as Turnus, it brings harm. The confrontation between the leaders of the two armies is also symbolized by the troops looking on from the left and right, as well as by the contrast between the light and dark backgrounds behind the figures.

Agency: In Vergil's epic, agency is asymmetrically distributed from the beginning of the scene. Turnus's knees are weak after failing to throw a massive rock (12, 1205). Aeneas, on the other hand, demonstrates that agency is entirely on his side by casting his spear and piercing the shield of his opponent, an act which is metaphorically characterized as immensely powerful: "No boulder ever catapulted from a siege engine sounded so, no thunderbolt had ever burst with such a roar" (12, 1228-1230). That the disarmed Rutulian ruler addresses Aeneas directly demonstrates that all Turnus has left in terms of possible actions is speech. His pleading apparently has an effect, because it almost manages to change Aeneas's mind. Sparked by the sight of the baldric on Pallas's belt, however, Aeneas's agency first shifts to channel the godly powers of the Furies ("enraged by the furies – his wrath was terrible", 12, 1264) and then the dead Pallas (Aeneas tells Turnus, "It is Pallas / who strikes, who sacrifices you, who takes / this payment from your shameless blood" 12, 1266-1268). It is only at this point that agency is transformed into a violent act.

These complex shifts in agency cannot be made explicit in the mosaic in the same way as in the epic. Turnus' pose represents a formula of pathos in which his submission symbolizes what is left of his agency. The mosaic also omits the injury that has brought Turnus to his knees in the epic and thus transforms his submissive pose into an expression of his own free will. The clearly superior agency of his opponent, Aeneas, is demonstrated via the contrasting postures of the two protagonists. The kneeling Turnus, who is shown in profile, is juxtaposed to the upright Trojan hero, who is facing us. It is also visible in the contrast between Aeneas's weapons, held firmly in his hands, and Turnus's weapons, which lie strewn on the ground in front of him.

Transgressiveness: The deadly violence inflicted on a pleading and defenceless enemy was a problem in the reception of this epic. Aeneas' deed forces us to judge it as either heroic or non-heroic. While two thousand years of Vergil exegesis have demonstrated that the author himself possibly intended this act to be judged as heroic, it has not been so unambiguously received in other cultural-historical contexts. The early Christian author Lactantius, for example, famously condemned Aeneas's merciless act.[7]

In the mosaic's pictorial representation, however, the violent act is omitted entirely, meaning its transgressiveness need not be addressed or justified. Because the mosaic directly refers to the *Aeneid*, the violent end of the scene is only implied, making this an explicit form of intermediality. One cannot help but bear in mind the canonical configuration of the narrative – and the *Aeneid* is doubtlessly the most important part of the canon. Thus while the violent act is not depicted, the beholder still imagines it as part of the scene.

Comparative analysis demonstrates that the different structural possibilities of the different media in this case also allow for different representations of violence. The narrative of the

epic poem, which is based on an event unfolding in a sequence, cannot omit the excessive violence from the myth. However, it can clearly emphasize the motivation behind the violence and possibly justify it. This is not possible in a mosaic, which is a medium that can only focus on a single scene. In both cases, the handling of violence is not only dependent on the representational possibilities of the medium, but also on the concrete intertextual/interpictorial references. The point of reference for the *Aeneid* is the Homeric epic poem. For the mosaic, on the other hand, the composition seems also to have been loosely influenced by 'submission pictures' of so-called Roman state art, in which violence is also usually not shown.

Game of Thrones: Heroism and violence in a televisual narrative

In this case study, we turn our focus to a scene from the first episode ("Dragonstone", 2017) of the seventh season of the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. This fantasy series, which is widely popular all over the world, is set in a medieval fantasy world and follows a protracted and brutal power struggle between several competing dynasties. In the scene in question, Arya Stark, who has learned to change appearances as part of her training to become an assassin, poisons all the men in the Frey family at a banquet to which they have been invited under false pretences. When the scene opens, she has assumed the appearance of the head of the family, Walder Frey. She then reveals her true identity to the men as they are dying from poison. It was in this ancestral home of the Freys where Arya's mother, her brother and his pregnant wife, and their entire entourage were murdered in the so-called Red Wedding ("The Rains of Castamere", season 3, episode 9). Arya's deed is thus staged as an act of revenge in the overall narrative of the series.

As a medium, television generally has the potential to depict violence explicitly and effectively. This multi-modal narrative form can have a great emotional impact on the audience. In contrast to viewing a live performance in a theatre, the selection of camera shots in a television show acts as a filter that can effectively direct the audience's attention and reactions. While *Game of Thrones* cannot be clearly subsumed under one genre, the series' epic elements offer a certain amount of freedom to include bloody and brutal scenes. The excessive portrayal of violence in the series has often been criticized, and at first glance, the sequence analysed in the following does not appear particularly violent compared to some of the brutal torture scenes and massacres for which the series is known. One critic wrote in *The Guardian* that the

> surprisingly unbloody start to the season saw only one real act of violence […]. That said, it was a particularly good one. (Hughes)

Judging from this reaction and the fact that a 'violence count' is a fixed part of Sarah Hughes's weekly reviews, it would be fair to say that the audience of this series is not only used to a fair amount of violence, but has also come to expect it. While the poisoning of an entire family in another, altogether less violent series would completely diminish the heroic potential of a character, it does not necessarily lead to de-heroization here, especially in light of the many far more gratuitous acts of violence in *Game of Thrones*. It will be demonstrated that the degree of violence the audience is willing to tolerate before it gets in the way of the reception of heroic greatness depends on how extensive the depiction of violence is within a given cultural product generally.

This scene also lends itself well to our purposes because it addresses the structural similarities between the phenomena of violence and heroism. Furthermore, the scene utilizes the possibilities offered by this medium in a very effective way: first by allowing Arya to seize a fundamental turning point; and second, by proposing an interpretation of her acts of violence as heroic.

Heroism is a theme from the beginning of the scene. Walder Frey makes it explicit when he tells the maids to serve wine and then toasts "proper wine for proper heroes". The men of the House of Frey who are assembled for the banquet are thus introduced as heroes, after which they are immediately de-heroized, creating a kind of heroic vacuum in the room. While heroism is present from the beginning, the heroes are eradicated.

Violence is equally present from the start, when previous acts of violence are mentioned. If we concentrate on the wording of Walder Frey's (Arya's) speech, these acts are at first characterized as heroic deeds:

> I'm proud of you lot. You're my family. The men who helped me slaughter the Starks at the Red Wedding. [The men cheer.] Yes, yes. Cheer! Brave men! All of you. Butchered a woman pregnant with a babe. Cut the throat of a mother of five. [Walder's wife raises an eyebrow.] Slaughtered your

> guests after inviting them into your home. (III/9)

The explicit pride and the men's cheering for themselves and calling themselves brave point to the fact that the Freys see themselves as heroes because they violently murdered the Starks.

The exaggeration of the violence through the use of the word "slaughter" and the following emphasis on the fact that the victims of the slaughter were innocent people (a pregnant woman, a mother) transform the acts from heroic deeds into wicked violence. The violence is thereby unjustified, and this turning point is made clear by the fading cheers of the men of the House of Frey as well as the image of Walder's young wife raising an eyebrow. This also reflects the audience's expected reaction. The scene ends with a very explicit depiction of the effects of the poisoning, which is thus revealed as an act of violence: all of the Frey men start coughing up blood and fall to the floor.

This act of violence is justified and aestheticized through means that are specific to this medium. By referring to the murder of the Starks, the massacre is identified as an act of revenge. By sparing the 'innocents' personified by the girls and women present (Walder's wife and daughters, as well as the maids), in contrast to the murder of Arya's mother and pregnant sister-in-law, the narrative structure suggests that violence is wielded against those who deserve it. This clear embedding of violence within an overall revenge narrative points to the fact that Arya's transgressive behaviour needs justification if the audience is to continue to sympathize with this character.

The violence is aestheticized both visually and audibly. The scene is visually set to make the banquet seem like a funeral party: it is dark, and candles are the only source of light. This also helps subdue the brutality of the scene because, while we can clearly see that the men are coughing up blood, the effects of the poisoning are not highlighted in a brightly lit setting or with vivid colours. Instead, they are shown under dim lighting, which reduces some of the shock. Some of the shots after the massacre are also reminiscent of *vanitas* paintings, establishing an intermediality that lets the massacre appear unavoidable and evokes the concept of *memento mori*. This aestheticization also fits with Arya's own assessment of her deed: "When people ask you what happened here, tell them […] winter came for House Frey." The formulation "winter came" is an extreme euphemism for the bloodbath and serves as a metaphor that presents it as a natural occurrence within the inevitable cycle of seasons. That the saying "winter is coming" is also the motto of Arya's family, House Stark, additionally marks her violent deed as an act of (potentially justified) revenge of the murder of her mother and brother.

The sounds of the scene also support an interpretation of the deed as heroic. In the first half of the scene, only diegetic sounds are heard – in other words, sounds that are part of the action: wine glasses clinking, laughter, talking in the background, cheering and so forth. After all of the men are murdered, there is a moment of complete silence. Then the music starts. Because this is the first use of non-diegetic sound after the massacre, the end of the scene acquires another level of filtering that imposes a certain interpretation of this act of violence: the drums and strings become increasingly louder, framing Arya's walk among the dead as a triumphal procession, thus giving it a 'positive' connotation and enhancing her appeal as a potentially heroic figure.

In addition to the need for justification and the element of attractiveness, the interaction between violence and heroism in this scene also addresses the aspects of agonality and transgression. It is the combination of these two qualities that leads Arya to this turning point, which is marked by this act of violence and forces the audience to form an opinion about whether or not she is a heroic figure.

Not only are the houses of Stark and Frey on opposite sides of an agonistic relationship, but it is also the men versus the women and the individual (Arya, in the guise of Walder Frey) against the many. This juxtaposition is also suggested by the many cutaway and reverse angle shots. As already explained, one group – the Freys, the men, the many – is first heroized and then quickly de-heroized through the exaggeration of their acts of violence and their revelling in it. By murdering them with poison instead of killing them in combat, Arya denies them a hero's death. Thus the heroic status is stripped away from one group, and Arya gains heroic potential as the extent of her transgressive actions becomes clear. She transgresses the boundaries between the sexes and the houses. She faces the many as an individual and she has the power to decide who shall live and who shall die.

The determination of whether Arya's act of violence is heroic or not is ultimately left up to the audience. The explicit evocation of heroism at the beginning of the scene, its narrative structure and the aestheticization of the act of violence force the audience to judge Arya. Ultimately, in the audience's eyes, Arya can go either way: she might still be a hero, or she might have turned evil. It seems impossible not to judge this

character and place her somewhere on the spectrum of hero, antihero and villain when watching this series. This is also reflected in the reactions to this episode on Twitter and in newspaper articles. Viewers either explicitly hailed Arya as a hero (see, for example, Hibberd) or wondered whether she should be regarded more as an anti-hero after this act of violence (see, for example, Kelly).

Ultimately, we can argue that the scene creates a kind of heroic vacuum that Arya is able to fill thanks to her potential to be a heroic figure. Her act of violence in this scene is justified by the narrative (not only embedded in the larger context of the overall series, but also explicitly and concretely in this scene). While the audience is presented with a choice and forced to judge Arya, the affordances specific to the medium of television in general and TV series in particular allow her act of violence to be aestheticized in a way that not only does not oppose the assessment of her act of violence as heroic, but even imposes – via the filter specific to this medium – an interpretation of this deed as heroic.

Conclusion

These two examples of analysis demonstrate how the representation of the link between heroism and violence is fundamentally determined by the media form. Each of the forms – epic text, mosaic, audio-visual narrative – has its own codes and modalities that determine how explicitly an act of violence will be represented and hence which aspects of it will be shown. This in turn is significant for how this depiction of violence will be interpreted by the audience (and is therefore specific to a certain time and culture). The representation of a violent act in media plays an important role in whether, and to what extent, the act is deemed heroic or not. It also influences the audience's emotional reaction to violence and inspires us to reflect on what heroism means in the first place. In particular, the examples demonstrate that the actual method of portrayal has a decisive effect on our ethical judgement of the transgressive action being represented. There may be worlds between the *Aeneid* and *Game of Thrones* in terms of time, culture and media, but both examples – with their respective media and formal possibilities – turn our attention towards the ethical ambivalences of heroism and the resulting need for justification much more than the mosaic's depiction of a moment in time is able to do. This is especially the case when heroism interacts with violence.

These examples confirm the idea that representations of physical violence and heroism share many structurally similar features. Both heroism and violence transgress norms. This compels recipients to make ethical judgements that are specific to certain times and cultures. Because the two narratives in the examples mentioned here have ambivalent aspects, both Arya Stark and Aeneas – the first a character in a current popular TV series, the latter a figure that has retained its cultural capital in the *longue durée* – compel the audience to take sides. In the scene analysed above, Arya uses deceit to accomplish her goal, and we ultimately watch a young woman commit a mass murder of men through poisoning. Yet many audience members still regard her deed as heroic because of their knowledge of "what happened previously". This is also the case with the ancient floor mosaic. In both cases, the backstory explains them as acts of revenge, thus justifying them: with Arya, it is the murder of her family, while in Aeneas's case, it is the dishonouring of his protégé, Pallas. However, there is a turning point in both narratives when heroism becomes questionable.

Although the TV series *Game of Thrones* owes some of its popularity to its heroizing conventions of representation, the heroism of all main protagonists is cast into doubt on many occasions. The portrayal of extreme outbursts of violence, for which the series is particularly notorious, serves as an instrument of heroization as long as the acts are regarded as justified and perceived as relieving a burden. In such cases, the depictions of violent acts have a positive, cathartic emotional effect on the audience. However, the transgressiveness of extreme depictions of violence can also undermine heroization. The affordances of the audio-visual medium of television in general and the media form of the TV series in particular bring out the emotional appeal of aesthetic, often exaggerated violence and allow the ethical questions it poses to rise to the surface.

The similarities and affinities shared by depictions of violence and depictions of heroism are important factors in determining how an audience will ultimately define heroism. But it is the *form* of the media product that filters the portrayal of violence, thereby creating the possibility for violence to be considered heroic in the first place.

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2 In German theatre studies, intermediality is sometimes defined as a condition (see Röttger). According to Fischer-Lichte's well-known theory of performativity, on the other hand, the performative aspect, or performing on stage, is what runs counter to mediality.

3 For more on this concept, see Caroline Levine's works in literary studies, as well as works in material culture, human computer interface studies (see Leonardi, Nardi, Kallanikos) and communication studies (see Wilson).

4 For more on the epic poem, see, among others, Farrell and Putnam. For more on the final scene, see especially Burnell and Galinsky.

5 For more on the mosaic, see Caetano and Mourão as well as António (the latter has a very different interpretation of the scene, however).

6 All translations are from Mandelbaum, unless otherwise specified.

7 See also Wlosok 18: "The killing of the defeated Turnus […] is carefully prepared by the author in previous scenes spread out over several books and is motivated as a necessary criminal procedure."

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