

About super-heroes and the anti-heroes of today

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I thought I could re-work an original text I wrote five years ago on this topic, a lengthy piece about how people conceive heroes, whether there is such an archetype currently, or whether this has transformed according to changes in contemporary values.

I am forced to start from scratch now since the original got lost after a combination of my computer breaking down and multiple international re-locations. I see this is an opportunity to re-interpret the theme altogether. Unfortunately, there is no point of comparison from my viewpoints then, so I will use reference material from others who have written about heroes and will present my own perspective as well.

Heroes behind decks

Whereas in the past most of my influences were independent films and books, I can confidently say that my biggest muse nowadays is music. I don't mean songs or artists only, but movements, genres and the lifestyles that accompany these.

I started going to music festivals in 2007, when I was 27 years old, a bit late in my life, by anyone's standards. With time it has become clear how much these experiences have shaped my taste, friendships, and the exploration of new territories.

Through these events and various others in my life, I have had the opportunity to discover new sounds, genres and music producers. I have been to many good and bad parties, have listened to many DJ sets, and have shared these moments with loved ones and friends as well as enjoying them personally.

A common topic of conversation has often been the DJs as the orchestrators of a certain mood, and, in many ways, the "heroes" of the party.

This is the first contemporary archetype I would like to look at. Because they are generally either overweight or anorexic looking, sport weird haircuts, dressed in extravagant outfits and not very good looking, DJs do not fit pop culture's description of a hero.

Traditional definition of a hero:

The essence of the hero is not bravery or nobility, but self-sacrifice. The mythic hero is one who will endure separation and hardship for the sake of his clan. The hero must pay a price to obtain his goal. The hero's journey during a story is a path from the ego, the self, to a new identity which has grown to include the experiences of the story. This path often

*consists of a separation from family or group to a new, unfamiliar and challenging world (even if it's his own back yard), and finally a return to the ordinary, but now expanded, world.**

This definition, however valid in terms of comic books and movies, is challenged by real-life subjects that are admired and followed in popular culture nowadays.

The closest example I can refer to, because of my musical preferences, is heroes in the Techno music scene.

For those unfamiliar with this electronic music genre, a good explanation is as follows:

*Happy music is easy to consume, you can just put yourself in the music and see what happens. It's passive, you don't have to do anything for it. With techno, it is not only dark but also very subtle and intense. It can make you lose your mind, make you freak totally out.***

In line with the above, one of the most influential personalities in Techno, Richie Hawtin, belongs to the second wave of Detroit DJs in the late 80s and early 90s, and is well known for the use of digital technology in his sets, and for being a pioneer of "minimal techno". He physically does not resemble Superman and he does not fight for the greater good of humanity. Nonetheless, at least in the electronic music circles, his work is regarded as seminal, which in a way could give him the status of a *hero*.

The first question that rises from this is obviously whether this is a biased interpretation because not everyone listens to electronic music. However promoting and consolidating a music genre is a merit on its own, amongst many.

I would not like the above, however, to detract from the line of argument of this piece. The focus here is not the heroes' actions or their actual impact, but how culture defines these beings whose actions are used to make them immortal in the collective unconscious.

The hero ideal of being: The prerequisites of being a hero

Traditionally a hero needed to go through a lot of hardship in order to find his enlightened and brave nature. When he/she realised this, he communicated his insight to others for the greater good of humanity.

I would like to take the above as the departure point of a discussion, one that I believe is relevant to our contemporary politics, and cultural change processes.

The traditional definition of a hero, as an archetype worth striving for, who is supposed to inspire us, one of an almost divine nature, was relevant at the beginnings of different historical periods, or during extreme transitions from an era to another - the Industrial Revolution, the Renaissance, the end of the Spanish Inquisition, amongst others.

As an iconic reference to illustrate my point, Milan Kundera writes:

*"The beginning of the modern novel as a genre goes back to Don Quixote, which was written in the 17th century."****

The opinions differ regarding the meaning hidden in the story, but the whole book is about a hero that is not one amongst people at that particular time; an anti-hero if you like.

Throughout the novel, Don Quixote's adventures and crusades are portrayed as insane. Only towards the end, Cervantes redeems his qualities when on his deathbed, he recovers sanity again.

It is unclear to what extent Cervantes aimed at portraying a character that, due to his chivalry delusions, was seen as outdated and mad or if, on the contrary, he wrote the novel as a satire of the society at the time ruled by the Catholic church, and its segregationist values. Either way, his achievement is that of developing a "Don Quixote" who can be praised

for his heroic adventures or pitied for them.

In this context if Don Quixote was an anti-hero in his own time, someone who was redeemed much later, attributes of our current heroes such as guiding party goers throughout the peak of their music senses, makes more sense than expected.

Why, you may wonder. Why would this make sense in a society that seems to lack honest and inspiring icons? Why is it that we value those who guide us through pleasurable experiences and make us feel invincible?

I think the beginning of the answer is given in the question itself.

An explanation could be that we are going through an era in which our senses seek to explore horizons beyond the world around us. It is an era of challenges to super-structures such as governments, and institutions. What is left is not a total disbelief in leaders, nor a lack of hope, but a differently shaped need for reaching higher states of consciousness; greater sensual experiences.

The DJ is a relevant archetype because he/she represents the anti-discourse of a traditional hero, and yet, guides people through a path of hope in order to reach a different state of mind.

The windmills of Don Quixote in this era, all of a sudden have different meanings. The United States fight an enemy that they have branded as terrorism, a characteristic that perhaps lives within them without them acknowledging it.

Meanwhile others, who don't want to take part in this political discourse, idealise contesting movements that promote interconnectedness and compassion: the New Age movement, Buddhism etc.

In between the extremes are those who, without noticing it, are adapting with the times because they can't help the transformations of the world around them. They also need something to believe in, and it is in this gap that the heroes, or the anti-heroes of today fit.

Even though many of us are not religious, nor we are involved in politics, there is something we aspire to. When facing this search, the hero archetype becomes one amongst other answers.

Finding the whole in individual actions

I would like to present my view on the hero as an archetype because this is the root of a lot of the answers to the questions posed in this piece.

There is a film I watched recently, which somehow summarised what I wanted to say about heroes. The film is based on a novel: "The Perks of being a Wallflower" by Stephen Schbosky. It tells the story of a misfit teenager who hurts the world around him.

The novel is a coming of age tale in which the main troubled character sees the world from the individuality of other people's problems.

In one of the scenes he says:

*Because I know there are people who say all these things don't happen. And there are people who forget what it's like to be 16 when they turn 17. I know these will all be stories someday. And our pictures will become old photographs. We'll all become somebody's mom or dad. But right now these moments are not stories. This is happening, I am here and I am looking at her. And she is so beautiful. I can see it. This one moment when you know you're not a sad story. You are alive, and you stand up and see the lights on the buildings and everything that makes you wonder. And you're listening to that song and that drive with the people you love most in this world. And in this moment I swear, we are infinite.*****

The song "Heroes" by David Bowie played in the background while Charlie, the main character, stood up in the back of a four by four, embracing the moment in its wholeness.

To me this was enlightening and it provided the explanation I was looking for on why some of our heroes are anti-heroes and why the archetype is so culturally significant.

When we see heroes or when we act like them, we look at the entire world from our own individual stories. We realise that our experiences are part of something bigger, and maybe we also see that no matter how lonely we feel, or how particular and unique our situation is, there is something beyond us, a big conglomerate of individual tales.

This means that when finding entirety in individual heroic moments, we reach a level of truth or insight about the universe.

In this sense, when a DJ leads a party, people share their own heroic moment, and similar to a contagious reaction, they feel part of a collective experience. They stop being individuals only to discover something that is beyond themselves, the outcome of their interaction with the music played and their connection with the DJ. Even if the exercise seems introverted, the feeling of unity with the whole prevails.

We all seek to connect because most of the time we feel that whatever is happening to us at a given point in time is something unique. We feel relieved when realising that we were not the first ones to overcome fear or feel extremely happy.

Our praise for heroes and anti-heroes represents our search for being infinite even if for a minute.

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*** (Marcel Dettman. Resident advisor. Tuesday, 10 March 2010. www.residentadvisor.net)*

****Kundera, Milan. 2005. The art of the novel. Faber & Faber.*

*****Charlie in Perks of being a Wallflower (2012)*

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