

Massimo Salgaro, Benjamin Van Tourhout

## Why Does Frank Underwood Look at Us? Contemporary Heroes Suggest the Need of a Turn in the Conceptualization of Fictional Empathy

- Full-length article in: JLT 12/2 (2018), 345–368.

Fictional heroes have long attracted the attention and emotions of their audiences and readers. Moreover, such sustained attention or emotional involvement has often taken the form of identification, even empathy. This essay suggests that since 9/11, however, a new cycle of heroism has emerged that has taken its place, namely the *hybrid hero* (cf. Van Tourhout 2017; 2018). Hybrid heroes have become increasingly popular during the post 9/11 period, offering escapism and reassurance to audiences in difficult times in which clear-cut divisions between good and bad, between right and wrong came under pressure. These characters challenge audiences and creators on moral and narrative levels because of their fluid symbiosis of heroic and villainous features. We find some well-known examples in contemporary TV-series such as *Breaking Bad*, *House of Cards*, etc. Hybrid heroes are looking for ways to arouse audiences and are aiming at the complicity of the audience. The most striking example of this complicit nature can be seen in the TV-series *House of Cards* when Frank Underwood addresses the audience by staring into the camera.

Traditional psychological and aesthetic theories on empathy are challenged by the phenomenon of the hybrid hero because empathy is generally conceived in prosocial terms, with most of the current research being geared toward a *positive* notion of empathy (cf. Johnson 2012; Bal/Veltkamp 2013; Koopman/Hakemulder 2015). Additionally, there has been a prevalent confusion between sympathy and empathy that has impacted our understanding of the perception of such heroes (cf. Jolliffe/Farrington 2006). In fact, one of the reasons for the predominantly positive connotation of empathy in the study of literary reception is that empathy has been narrowly defined as »sympathy and concern for unfortunate others« (Bal/Veltkamp 2013, 2). The distinction between empathy and sympathy is crucial in the study of immoral figures because, as research has shown, only sympathy involves a moral judgement.

The concept of a hybrid hero pushes us to decouple the core of fictional empathy from moral impulses or prosocial actions because it demands a »suspension of moral judgement from its viewer« (cf. Vaage 2013). Some recent studies (cf. Happ/Melzer/Steffgen 2015) have found that empathic responses to videogames cause antisocial effects, while others report cases of »tactical empathy« (cf. Bubandt/Willerslev 2016) or »empathic sadism«, which allows the fiction reader to predict the feelings of the characters and to find enjoyment in this prediction, independently of the negative state and the pain of them (cf. Breithaupt 2016).

We believe that the conceptualisation of an emotional bond between the audience and questionable or hybrid heroes will only be permitted through a turn in the approach to the concept of fictional empathy in media studies and aesthetic theory. Thus, the scope of the present paper is not only to describe the phenomenon of the hybrid hero, but also the specific notion of empathy and aesthetic enjoyment that the concept of a hybrid hero demands, that, compared to the present concepts of empathy: (1) distinguishes empathy from sympathy, (2) decouples empathy from morality, (3) takes into account the aesthetic enjoyment associated with negative emotions and moral violations. Finally, we argue that this renewed concept of

fictional empathy should be incorporated into newly introduced models of art reception, which integrate both positive and negative emotions in art fruition (cf. Menninghaus et al. 2017). Recent research in empirical aesthetics and media psychology seems to support this view in showing that a moral violation in fictional stories produces mixed emotional and enjoyable responses (cf. McGraw/Warren 2010). The success of the hybrid hero confirms that the interplays of positive, negative and mixed emotion elicited by ambivalent figures such as the hybrid hero can partially explain the massive success and broader impact of contemporary TV series.

## References

- Anderson, Craig A./Karen E. Dill, Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78:4 (2000), 772–790.
- Aristotle, *The Poetics*, transl. by W. Hamilton Fyfe, Cambridge, MA 1932.
- Bal, P. Matthijs/Martijn Veltkamp, How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation, *Plos One* 8:1 (2013), e55341.
- Baron-Cohen, Simon, *The Science of Evil. On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*, New York 2012.
- BBC, Amnesty Poll Finds 29% Say Torture Can Be Justified, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-27387040> (01. 06. 2018).
- Berlyne, Daniel E., *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, New York, NY 1971.
- Berlyne, Daniel E. (ed.), *Studies in the New Experimental Aesthetics. Steps Toward an Objective Psychology of Aesthetic Appreciation*, Washington, DC 1974.
- Bernardelli, Andrea, Etica criminale. Le trasformazioni della figura dell'antieroe nella serialità televisiva, *Between* 6:11 (2016), 1–19.
- Bloom, Paul, *Against Empathy. The Case for Rational Compassion*, New York, NY 2016.
- Breithaupt, Fritz, Empathy for Empathy's Sake. Aesthetic and Everyday Aesthetic Sadism, in: Aleida Assmann/Ines Detmers (eds.), *Empathy and Its Limits*, New York 2016, 151–165.
- Bubandt, Nils/Rene Willerslev, The Dark Side of Empathy. Mimesis, Deception, and the Magic of Alterity, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57:1 (2016), 5–34.
- Buck, Donald, Juan Salvo y Vela and the Rise of the Comedia de Magia. The Magicians as Anti-Hero, *Hispania* 69:2 (1986), 251–261.
- Burke, Michael/Anežka Kuzmičová/Anne Mangel/Theresa Schilhab, Empathy at the Confluence of Neuroscience and Empirical Literary Studies, *Scientific Study of Literature* 6:1 (2016), 6–41.
- Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [1949], Princeton, NJ 32008.
- Cavedon, Christina, *Cultural Melancholia. US Trauma Discourses Before and After 9/11*, Leiden et al. 2015.
- Cochran, Robert/Joel Surnow, *24*, Season 1, Episode 1, 20th Century Fox Television, Los Angeles 2001.
- Cohen, Jonathan, Defining Identification. A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters, *Mass Communication and Society* 4:3 (2001), 245–264.
- Coplan, Amy, Understanding Empathy. Its Features and Effects, in: A. C./Peter Goldie (eds.), *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, Oxford 2004, 4–19.
- Croci, Daniele/Emanuele Monegato/Anna Pasolini, *Cattivi. Cattivissimi. Cattivi? Sulle tracce di eroi criminali nelle narrazioni di genere*, Milano 2016.
- Davis, Mark H., A Multidimensional Approach to Individual Differences in Empathy, *JSAS Catalogue of Selected Documents in Psychology* 10 (1980), 85–103.

- Davis, Mark H., Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy. Evidence for a Multidimensional Approach, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44 (1983), 113–126.
- Djikic, Maja/Keith Oatley/Mihnea Moldoveanu, Reading Other Minds. Effects of Literature on Empathy, *Scientific Study of Literature* 3:1 (2013), 28–47.
- Donnelly, Ashley M., *Renegade Hero or Faux Rogue. The Secret Traditionalism of Television Bad Boys*, Jefferson, NC 2014.
- Eisenberg, Nancy, Empathy-Related Responding. Links with Self-Regulation, Moral Judgment, and Moral Behavior, in: Mario Mikulincer/Phillip R. Shaver (eds.), *Prosocial Motives, Emotions, and Behaviour. The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Washington, DC 2010, 129–148.
- Fechner, Gustav Theodor, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, Leipzig 1876.
- Garcia, Alberto N. (ed.), *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series*, Basingstoke, Hampshire 2016.
- Grasso Aldo, *Buona maestra. Perché i telefilm sono diventati più importanti del cinema e dei libri*, Milano 2007.
- Hansen, Svend, The Birth of the Hero. The Emergence of a Social Type in the 4th Millennium BC, in: Elisabetta Starnini (ed.), *Unconformist Archaeology. Papers in Honour of Paolo Biagi*, Oxford 2013, 101–112.
- Happ, Christian/André Melzer/Georges Steffgen, Like the Good or Bad Guy-Empathy in Antisocial and Prosocial Games, *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 4:2 (2015), 80–96.
- Hassler-Forest, Dan, Superheroes and the Bush Doctrine. Narrative and Politics in Post-9/11 Discourse, Diss., University of Amsterdam 2011.
- Iyengar, Sunil, *To Read or Not to Read. A Question of National Consequence*, Research Report 47, National Endowment for the Arts, Office of Research & Analysis, Washington, DC 2007.
- Johnson, Don R., Transportation Into a Story Increases Empathy, Prosocial Behaviour, and Perceptual Bias Toward Fearful Expressions, *Personality and Individual Differences* 52 (2012), 150–155.
- Johnson, Don R., Transportation Into Literary Fiction Reduces Prejudice Against and Increases Empathy for Arab-Muslims, *Scientific Study of Literature* 3:1 (2013), 77–92.
- Jolliffe, Darrick/David P. Farrington, Development and Validation of the Basic Empathy Scale, *Journal of Adolescence* 29:4 (2006), 589–611.
- Keen, Suzanne, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford et al. 2007.
- Keller, James R., The Vice in Vice President. House of Cards and the Morality Tradition, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 43:3 (2015), 111–120.
- Kidd, David C./Emanuele Castano, Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind, *Science* 342 (2013), 377–380.
- Konijn, Elly A./Johan F. Hoorn, Some Like It Bad. Testing a Model on Perceiving and Experiencing Fictional Characters, *Media Psychology* 7:2 (2005), 107–144.
- Koopman, Eva Marie/Frank Hakemulder, Effects of Literature on Empathy and Self-Reflection. A Theoretical-Empirical Framework, *Journal of Literary Theory* 9:1 (2015), 79–112.
- Krakowiak K. Maja/Mary Beth Oliver, When Good Characters Do Bad Things. Examining the Effect of Moral Ambiguity on Enjoyment, *Journal of Communication* 62:1 (2012), 117–135.
- Lee, Stan, *Spider Man: Amazing Fantasy*, New York 1962.
- Lott, Eric, The Whiteness of Film Noir, *American Literary History* 9:3 (1997), 542–566.
- Mar, Raymond A./Keith Oatley/Jacob Hirsh/Jennifer de la Paz/Jordan B. Peterson, Bookworms Versus Nerds. The Social Abilities of Fiction and Non-Fiction Readers, *Journal of Research in Personality* 40 (2006), 694–712.

- Mar, Raymond A./Keith Oatley/Jordan B. Peterson, Exploring the Link Between Reading Fiction and Empathy. Ruling Out Individual Differences and Examining Outcomes, *Communications. The European Journal of Communication* 34 (2009), 407–428.
- McGraw, A. Peter/Caleb Warren, Benign Violations Making Immoral Behavior Funny, *Psychological Science* 21:8 (2010), 1141–1149.
- Melnick, Jeffrey, *9/11 Culture. America Under Construction*, Chichester, West Sussex 2009.
- Menninghaus, Winfried/Valentin Wagner/Julian Hanich/Eugen Wassiliwizky/Thomas Jacobsen/Stefan Koelsch, The Distancing-Embracing Model of the Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in Art Reception, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 40 (2017), e347.
- Mittell, Jason, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York, NY 2015.
- Moïsi, Dominique, *La géopolitique des series*, Paris 2016.
- Morelli Sylvia A./Matthew D. Lieberman/Jamil Zaki, The Emerging Study of Positive Empathy, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 9:2 (2015), 57–68.
- Morley, Catherine, *9/11 Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*, London 2016.
- Mumper Micah/Richard C. Gerrig, Leisure Reading and Social Cognition. A Meta-Analysis, *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 11 (2017), 109–120.
- Nussbaum, Martha C., *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, MA, 2003.
- Oatley, Keith, Fiction. Simulation of Social Worlds, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20:8 (2016), 618–628.
- Pheasant-Kelly, Frances, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, New York 2013.
- Piga, Emanuela, Il personaggio seriale, in: Stefano Calabrese (ed.), *Narrare al tempo della globalizzazione*, Rome 2016, 59–75.
- Posner, Richard, Against Ethical Criticism, *Philosophy and Literature* 21:1 (1997), 1–27.
- Prinz, Jesse J., Is Empathy Necessary for Morality, in: Amy Coplan/Peter Goldie (eds.), *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, Oxford 2011, 211–229.
- Saporito, Jeff, *Why Have Television Audiences Fallen so Hard for the Anti-Hero?*, *SCREEENPRISM* (2016), <http://screenprism.com/insights/article/why-have-television-audiences-fallen-so-hard-for-the-anti-hero> (01.06/2018).
- Shafer, Daniel/Arthur Raney, Exploring How We Enjoy Antihero Narratives, *Journal of Communication* 62:6 (2012), 1028–1046.
- Singer, Tania/Ben Seymour/John P. O’Doherty/Klaas E. Stephan/Raymond J. Dolan/Chris D. Frith, Empathic Neural Responses Are Modulated by the Perceived Fairness of Others, *Nature* 433 (2006), 466–469.
- Stansfield, John/Louise Bunce, The Relationship Between Empathy and Reading Fiction. Separate Roles for Cognitive and Affective Components, *Journal of European Psychology Students* 5:3 (2014), 9–18.
- Vaage, Margrethe Bruun, Fictional Reliefs and Reality Checks, *Screen* 54:2 (2013), 218–237.
- Vaage, Margrethe Bruun, *The Antihero in American Television*, New York et al. 2016.
- Van Tourhout, Benjamin, The Hybrid Hero. A Contagious Counterexample, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (2017), 1–28.
- Van Tourhout, Benjamin, *Hybrid Heroes and Ambiguous Empathy*, Diss., University of Leuven and Luca School of Arts 2018.
- Versluys, Kristiaan, *Out of the Blue. September 11 and the Novel*, New York et al. 2009.
- Willimon, Beau, *House of Cards*, Season 1, Episode 1, Netflix, Los Gatos 2013.
- Wondra, Joshua D./Phoebe C. Elsworth, An Appraisal Theory of Empathy and Other Vicarious Emotional Experiences, *Psychological Review* 122:3 (2015), 411–428.
- Zaki, Jamil, Empathy. A Motivated Account, *Psychological Bulletin* 140 (2014), 1608–1647.
- Zimbardo, Philip, *The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, Michigan, NY 2007.

2018-09-16  
JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

**Copyright** © by the author. All rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and JLTONline.

For other permission, please contact [JLTONline](#).

**How to cite this item:**

Abstract of: Massimo Salgaro, Benjamin Van Tourhout, Why Does Frank Underwood Look at Us? Contemporary Heroes Suggest the Need of a Turn in the Conceptualization of Fictional Empathy.

In: JLTONline (16.09.2018)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-004065

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-004065>