
HERO TRANSFORMATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY MAINSTREAM FILM

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Abstract

The paper deals with the characteristics of a hero, who is the protagonist of the current mainstream movie and influences the broader cultural awareness. The authors explore transformations of film heroes in the most important decades of cinematography. They try to answer some key questions: what are most significant features of a hero in his function as a dramatic character or cultural symbol? What psychological process can be traced under his actions? Does he symbolically perform something that is important for development of human soul? What are the social meanings which contemporary movie producers tries to incorporate in their works? Which skills or abilities the classic and contemporary hero promotes? Cinematography of third millennium indicates that despite the postmodern philosophers' claims about the end of grand narratives, the great heroes didn't vanish, quite on the contrary. Today's popular hero shows exceptional abilities along with some deeply human personal qualities (matured moral consciousness, capacity to feel compassion for the weak and helpless). Contemporary hero is usually a person, who found himself in an unusual situation that requires a creative solution. The audience wouldn't be impressed anymore just by demonstration of his brute power. The hero must show his ability to integrate all attributes, which create human nature, including weakness. The current hero has messianic traits, he is both strong and sensitive at the same time. He is capable of sacrifice and he is trying to bring forth to contemporary film audiences the message of discovering meaning of life in service to others.

Keywords: superhero, Messiah, Hollywood, comics, pop culture

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on most important changes of the hero in contemporary mainstream movies. What we have observed over in nearly a decade is the rising popularity of comics-based movies (*Spider-Man*, *Batman*, *X-Men*), movies which can be characterized by massive production (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Avatar*) and unusual range of scripts dealing with global threats (*Watchmen*, *The Avengers*). What is interesting about these popular film are three elements: strong epic dimension (strong story), hero with unique

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combination of abilities (character, unique skills, supernatural abilities) and hero's altruistic motive and dedication to help others. It turns out that culture does not always behave according to the expectations and ideas of philosophers. What we can see in the contemporary cinematography, is the fact that the expectations and even fantasies of scholars examining state of the society, which originated from the eighties, do not match very well with what we observe in the current cultural production.

Jean-François Lyotard, a French philosopher, in his publication *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, postulated 'the end of grand narratives' (religions, mythology, ideologies) as a typical manifestation of the postmodern condition [1]. The meta-narratives lost their impact in society. The modern communication and the swift flow of capital caused the shrinking of time and space (Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens) [2, 3]. Western society found itself in the situation, when previously competing ideologies and religions appeared in one global space and no truth with a 'capital T' actually appeared to be valid. It was obvious that each culture and social group perceived reality from its small, limited perspective and articulated its experience in specific meta-narrative. Therefore, no meta-narrative could be considered as universal and 'everything is relative'.

It is easy to come to some premature conclusions in terms of society analysis. However it is true that since the eighties we could observe value relativism, secularization, disappearance of ethics of self-sacrifice, turnover from spiritual meaning of reality to superficial facets of everyday life and consumerism, drifting and destabilizing of human identity, fear of commitment and responsibility. However, these mentioned phenomena are not the evidence of moral decline of a man and a Western society. They might rather be understood as the signals of struggling for new identity and personal meaning, as crisis phenomena, offering a chance for new developments and achievements. For example, increasing secularization was accompanied by the rise of fundamentalism and religiously motivated terrorism (Benjamin Barber) [4], but also by new forms of spirituality with roots in mysticism (Karl Rahner, Tomáš Halík) [5]. The proclaimed end of religions and meta-narratives did not happen at all. It is even evident that decaying social order (as it was described by Francis Fukuyama) [6] is accompanied by parallel efforts to create new global ethics. Their traces can be seen in the environmental movements, social and political activism of the widest social groups, volunteering, in criticism of corporatism, raising interest in a healthy lifestyles, efforts in inter-religious dialogue and understanding (Hans Küng, Pavel Hošek) [7]. There was obvious renaissance of the novel in the book industry in the eighties, although postmodernists proclaimed the end of great narratives and stories [8]. Digital media did not weaken man's desire to read. The first decade of the third millennium flooded the cultural market with historical and parahistorical novels, massive mythical sagas, comics worlds, stories about heroes and superheroes with complex character and admirable qualities. General need for values, heroes and reinforcing stories seems to be nevertheless historically stable.

In this paper, we assume that the desire of man for safety, justice, knowledge, love, self-realization and self-transcendence is universal. The need for hero has not disappeared. The man has still been looking for the role model with whom he could identify, a character who symbolizes his existential situation and embodies its creative solution. The heroes of contemporary mainstream movies show many features of the classic hero. Their own classic dilemmas, excellence in their efforts and the sense for serving others can inspire us to see them as a psychological mirror, in which today's man is searching for his own face.

2. Popular culture and the mainstream movie

Popular culture is the most frequent and consumed symbolic culture of our times. It is the bearer of meanings that are important for self-identification and socialization of media audiences. It reflects social phenomena and influences social reality retrospectively. Mainly the mainstream film as an important element of popular culture offers sort of 'diagnosis' of the state of society. It reflects the motivation, needs, conflicts and frustrations of contemporary man. According to John Fiske, Australian-American media and culture theorist, social relevance is the key characteristic of popular culture: "If the cultural resource does not offer points of pertinence through which the experience of everyday life can be made to resonate with it, then it will not be popular. As everyday life is lived and experienced fluidly, through shifting social allegiances, these points of pertinence must be multiple, open to social rather than textual determinations, and transient." [9]

Fiske also argues that if the products of popular culture (including the mainstream films) contain elements, whereby the users can create their own meanings and specific understanding of their own social situation, it gives them pleasure. He calls such qualities of popular culture as 'social meanings'. They might be put to a contradiction to 'aesthetic relevance', which activate the aesthetic evaluation approach of the user (e.g. category beautiful/ugly in considering the quality of artistic work). The successful mainstream film tries to attract its audience by both features – with impressive visuals (aesthetic level) as well as with attractive theme (social level).

Contemporary film industry is dominated by six major movie studios (Columbia Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, Walt Disney Pictures, Universal Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures). The Hollywood studios were estimated to participate in three-fourths of the global world film production in 2005. At that time, the average costs of film production was \$ 50 million and the same amount represented the cost of distribution. This amount is constantly increasing. For example, production costs of James Cameron's *Avatar* are estimated at 280 to 310 million U.S. dollars and distribution cost about \$ 150 million. Each of the major movie studios annually finances from 7 to 8 major feature films and about dozen or more films with medium budget.

In order to get the costs back, at least one of the films produced must become a mass hit. Approximately 10 of the most successful films annually account from a third to half of the annual profits of film companies [10]. It is obvious that film has become substantial part of a globalized culture. Therefore we will focus our attention to American Hollywood movies in this study as a representative sample of popular culture. They might be said to have a global cultural impact.

According to Thomas Schatz [11], Hollywood currently produces three different types of films:

- blockbuster designed with the multimedia marketplace and franchise status in mind,
- the mainstream A-class star vehicle with sleeper-hit potential,
- and the low-cost independent feature targeted for specific market and with little chance of anything more than 'cult film' status.

For the purposes of this article, we do not distinguish between the categories of blockbuster and mainstream film. The difference between them is based more on economic rather than aesthetic criteria.

In terms of mainstream film, the audience usually expects a story that unfolds as the series of causes and effects, with one main character portrayed by a star. The story consists of main and secondary story line. The main story line is a romantic relationship between a man and woman (private sphere) and secondary line turns on thrilling action – e.g. adventure, business, crime (public sphere). The story culminates in a romantic conclusion [12]. An example of such a film is *Spider-Man* (2005). In contrast, low-budget independent film is produced without the use of funds of major film companies and therefore, it often does not follow Hollywood conventions. It can creatively bypass them (*Synecdoche, New York*, 2008) or be critical to social stereotypes (*Little Children*, 2006).

Contemporary mainstream film is a result of interaction between the works, producers and audience. The films, whose makers are most effectively capable to meet and shape cultural needs of audience, will most likely, succeed. At present, the majority of moviegoers consist of the youth, aged between twelve to twenty-four years [12, p. 130]. That is the reason, why the biggest film companies target their marketing activities precisely on this group of consumers. Its cultural requirements are appropriate of their age and not as rich as the tastes of more age diverse audiences, who attended the cinema in the 60s. Young audiences can also explain the rapidly rising popularity of the comics-based movies, fantastic themes and the genre of horror. We can state as well that the current mainstream film acquired its shape according to the tastes of the youth.

3. Social meanings in mainstream movies

It is not possible to explain the visual and narrative functions of the film only from aesthetic perspective. Apart from the pleasure of watching a film image, which has essentially unconscious nature [13, 14], the spectator is mostly

interested in the elements of the story that resonates with his own life experiences. These elements are social meanings. Social meanings may have roots in plot, they may be provoked by a discourse (the way in which film story is narrated) or they emerge along with identification with the protagonists of the film. As the social meanings are the criteria of film mass popularity, it is obvious that these elements are very carefully chosen and manufactured by film producers: they try to encourage their emergence as much as possible. The aesthetic meanings central to popular film are the result of camera work, film editing, director's and art director's aesthetic concepts, settings, costumes, actions and special effects.

What are the origins of social meanings in the movie? Social meanings may be based either on the universal human experience or on his everyday life struggles. In both cases, we can talk about the social relevance of the movie: in the first case, the film appeals to basic human psychological needs; it relies on the inherited cognitive structures and well known cultural symbols traded from generation to generation. In the second case, film responds to current social situation and the way of life in contemporary society. Some examples of social meanings in the film are as follows: struggle between the good and evil (*Harry Potter*, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011), struggle with the nature (*Life of Pi*, 2012), facing up to irrational or supernatural forces which represents the unconsciousness (*The Ring*, 2002), fighting with our own dark side as an inevitable part of human nature (*Black Swan*, 2010), need for self-actualization (*The Fighter*, 2010), the need to be appreciated by the others (*The Great Gatsby*, 2013), the revolt of Prometheus (*Oblivion*, 2013), longing for love (*Silver Linings Playbook*, 2012), desire for justice (*The Constant Gardener*, 2005), conspiracy motive (*Breach*, 2007), scapegoat theme (*The Hunger Games*, 2012) and saviour theme (*World War Z*, 2013).

4. Hero and his functions

In pursuit of social relevance, the mainstream film must introduce a convincing hero to its viewers. It must be a character that the audience can identify with and admire at the same time. The hero raises a feeling of being one of us, but better than us in one way or the other. For example the heroin can be more capable or competent than the other people (*Erin Brockovich*, 2000). The hero represents our idealized self. Of course, we can imagine the opposite situation as well. Figure with negative character modeled so suggestive that he pulls the audience's admiration and fascination, regardless of his immoral behavior. In this case, it is the anti-hero. Anti-hero embodies the dark, negative side of human nature. He personifies the unconscious forces and thereby gaining his psychological functioning (such a figure is e.g. Loki from the comic film *The Avengers*, 2012).

Hero is a complex concept which consists of two distinct components: idea of 'heroism' as an exceptional and admired human quality; b) appearance of dramatic character. Classic hero represents the highest social ideals, values and

qualities (Hamlet, Jean Valjean). He integrates several different functions: he is a personality ideal, dramatic figure, cultural symbol and psychological archetype. Therefore he can become a powerful role model. Classic hero embodies the patterns of behavior praised in a particular community. He serves as a 'moral mirror' and he often personifies creative ways of solution of conflicts typical for this community. The philosopher and writer Andrew Bernstein recognizes four key aspects of heroism: 1) moral size 2) abilities and bravery, 3) activity despite the obstacles, 4) spiritual victory, even in the case of practical failure [A. Bernstein, *The Philosophical Foundations of Heroism*, online at <http://www.mikementzer.com/heroism.html>].

Attraction of film characters and heroes cannot be adequately understood without investigating why the audience seeks and needs this powerful symbol. Analytical psychology describes the hero as an archetype [15]. The hero personifies the power of conscious intellect and ego over the unconsciousness. He symbolizes man's courage and initiative, his will and energy (Luke Skywalker from the first three episodes of *Star Wars*, 1977, 1980, 1983). Hero tries to maintain the coherence of personality, gives us the sense of continuity. Within the consciousness, he serves the role of 'gatekeeper' – he decides which perceptions, thoughts, feelings and memories may enter into consciousness. If the hero struggles with the monster, but does not kill it, it is a symbolic representation of how conscious ego fights with the forces of the unconsciousness. The hero paradoxically cannot win by final defeating of evil. In order to become integrated human being and fully matured personality, one must be able to integrate his or her dark side, not to displace it or destroy. The archetype of shadow is as an embodiment of basic instincts of a man, his strong primary emotions, spontaneity and creativity. Dark instincts are not evil; they are source of realistic insights and adaptive responses, which helps man to survive.

Therefore, if the hero kills the embodiment of everything what is dark and evil, it may happen that such a person will not be able to reach maturity. One must patiently seek for cooperation between the ego (consciousness) and the shadow (instinct). However this effort does not always lead to automatic success. For example in comics-based film *X-Men: First Class* (2011) Erik Lensherr does not manage the struggle with his own shadow, he chose the attitude of general distrust towards the people and becomes the enemy with nickname Magneto. Symbols of successful completion of the process of personal growth are the archetypes of wise old man (Gandalf from the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001) and the great mother (Aurora from the *Terms of Endearment*, 1983). Not only analytical psychology emphasizes the need to transition from individuality to mutuality. The humanistic psychology does that as well (Abraham Maslow, Alfred Adler).

At some point, the individual journey of the hero always turns to other people. According to the American anthropologist Joseph Campbell, who examined the appearances, qualities and functions of a hero in different cultures, the hero is man or woman: "Who has been able to battle past his or hers personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normal human forms. Such

a one's visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man – perfected, unspecific, universal man – he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore ... is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed." [16].

The challenge of a hero is actually double: one is a confrontation with oneself and second is confrontation with community.

The noblest representative of a hero is Messiah, the Saviour. Messiah wins over oneself and triumphs over the world. He symbolizes a cosmic man, the integration of divine and human nature (Jesus Christ). The Lifesaver represents more civil form of this character.

Hero with messianic traits can evoke sheer admiration in his audience. The viewers can experience the joy of observing and experiencing his victory and feel compassion towards him. This contrasts greatly with the character of anti-hero. Some forms of evil can be fascinating, but even the most charismatic negative character cannot simultaneously arouse deep respect and empathy in the audience. What are the main features of a messianic hero? In addition to dedication to his mission, which he is clearly aware of, he is vulnerable, willing to sacrifice himself if necessary and dedicated to service to others.

5. Strong and weak hero

Appearance of a hero is always the result of current societal crises. The hero embodies not only the most common conflicts, but also skills and abilities desirable at any given time. Whereas he should be a convincing psychological type, his desires and character must portray something common in a wider social group. Therefore, it is interesting to observe that through the history of mainstream film the periods with preference of strong or weak hero can be traced and discerned.

Between 30s and 50s of 20th century, the significant growth of film industry caused cinematography to become the mass media in the strict sense. In this time within the U.S. there were exceptionally popular sci-fi movies about aliens or unknown threats (*The Thing From Another World*, 1951). The directors depicted brave resistance of population. Paranoid atmosphere of these films clearly refers to the Cold War. Also historical films were common. They offered a classic hero figure, which stands out for his strength and courage (*Ben Hur*, 1959; *Spartacus*, 1960). The audience was attracted to a charismatic, resourceful hero (*Lawrence of Arabia*, 1962; *Goldfinger*, 1964). The adaptations of famous novels introduced rich main character (*Doctor Zhivago*, 1965). More creative directors tried to seduce the audiences with memorable anti-heroes (*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967; *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969).

In the 70s, the strong hero is substituted by weak, failing or *failed hero*. It is often a character who struggles with social system (*One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, 1975) or found himself involved in crime and social problems (*The French Connection*, 1971; *Taxi Driver*, 1976). Unstable political situation was also reflected in some espionage movies (*The Conversation*, 1974; *All the President's Men*, 1976). Story of a man afflicted by the war, which was previously common in inter-war and post-war literature (Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque) now captures the attention of film audiences. Heavy imagery and stern atmosphere of *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) depicting the Vietnam War captivated the public. These films helped to raise social awareness through authentic representation of war horrors, moral conflicts and impact of war on the psyche of individuals.

The 80s has brought significant change to the appearance of the hero. Those were the years of economic progress. General contentment, even enthusiasm, and optimistic expectations from the future has find its reflection in the film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). The mainstream film clearly glorifies the technology and its options (*Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980). Rarely, technology is a source of concern (*The Terminator*, 1984). However the film industry welcomes and examines technology because it is a powerful tool for fashioning spectacular effects (*Blade Runner*, 1982; *Brazil*, 1985). Confidence of 80s was particularly visible in the action film genre. This decade introduced new Hollywood stars, who have become the idols of children and youth: Arnold Schwarzenegger a Sylvester Stallone. They were preceded by the icon of martial arts Bruce Lee – but instead of formerly admired speed and reflexes, the attention of new youth has now turned to massive muscular body. The body of *an action hero* has become a metaphor for strength and resilience. The 80s brought several cult-classics that became milestones of popular film. Many of them were followed by highly expected sequels: *Conan the Barbarian* (1982, 1984), *Predator* (1987, 1990), *Highlander* (1986, 1991, 1994, 2000), *Commando* (1985), *The Running Man* (1987), *Robocop* (1987, 1990, 1993), *First Blood/Rambo* (1982, 1985, 1988, 2008), *The Terminator* (1984, 1991, 2003, 2009).

The most common motivation of the action hero was desire for revenge or justice and the fight against organized crime. These were the social meanings, which mostly resonated with the audience at that time. Although the eighties was a period of economic prosperity, it was still a period with high levels of crime [17]. The action hero was practically invulnerable, he had no weakness, did not show any signs of sensitivity or emotionality. He ruthlessly destroyed every opponent. A number of films presented the hero, who won the sympathy of viewers by his use of irony or sarcasm. Such figures were portrayed by Mel Gibson, Harrison Ford, Bill Murray and Bruce Willis: *Mad Max* (1979, 1981, 1985), *Indiana Jones* (1984, 1989), *Ghost Busters* (1984, 1989), *Die Hard* (1988, 1990, 1995, 2007) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987, 1989, 1992, 1998).

Invulnerability and efforts to engross the attention at any cost let us characterize this dramatic figure as a narcissistic personality [18, 19]. In the comparison to the classical hero [A. Bernstein, *The Philosophical Foundations of Heroism*, online at <http://www.mikementzer.com/heroism.html>; M. Singh and M.-Y. Lu, *Exploring the Function of Heroes and Heroines in Children's Literature From Around the World*, online at <http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-1/heroes.htm>], there is a clear shift from bravery to heroism in narcissistic dramatic character. Originally inner qualities were transformed into a set of external features (classic hero – narcissistic hero):

- moral greatness – narcissistic ‘greatness’,
- skills and bravery – sleight and cunning,
- activity despite obstacles – activity without barriers,
- spiritual victory despite the practical failure – total winning at any cost,
- personal courage – absence of fear,
- caring for others – self care/manipulation of others,
- persistence – inexhaustibility,
- inventiveness – mechanical perfection,
- self confidence – self-adoration,
- optimism – cynicism.

In the 90s the action genre welcomed ‘new blood’: Jean-Claude van Damme, Dolph Lundgren and Steven Seagal who tried to impress the youth in *Double Impact* (1991), *Universal Soldier* (1992), *Under Siege* (1992, 1995) and *On Deadly Ground* (1994). However this film genre with too simple plots, brainless villains and one-dimensional characters gradually faded away. The action hero was worn out. Somewhat sleeker and emotionally more authentic version of the action hero for the last decade of the 20th century was portrayed by Keanu Reeves in the *Speed* (1994). *Uncertain hero* came back to the cinematography in a period of rapid development of computer technology. The audiences now resonate with disturbing themes and related social meanings of general distrust, loss of sense of security and safety, doubts about self-identity and collapsing mental health: *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), *The Game* (1997), *Lost Highway* (1997), *Fight Club* (1999). The weakness of main characters can be documented by examining light comedies of this period: *Hot Shots!* (1991, 1993), *Ace Ventura* (1994, 1995), *The Naked Gun* (1988, 1991, 1994).

More original filmmakers responded to the change of zeitgeist by most enchanting, persuasive, indifferent or vicious anti-heroes so far: *Nikita* (1990), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Trainspotting* (1996), *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Dramatic character who did not believe in anything became trendy. This character did not have any goal in his life, his only motivation was to mercilessly beat his opponents or to amuse himself, and cynicism became his survival strategy as well as identification sign. It was the typical postmodern hero. Some directors even refrained from any efforts to depict psychological nature and depth of their characters (Luc Besson, *Léon*, 1994). In the 90s, it

became clear that the dreams of the previous decade of progress and bright future would not be fulfilled.

6. Superhero and messianic hero

It is not too surprising that the mainstream films of the first decade of third millennium introduced a new hero, who again gained his confidence. However he is not self-sufficient invincible hero. He is the hero who is strong and weak at the same time. Moreover, he openly shows his weakness and somewhat proudly and humbly present himself as a vulnerable character. Nevertheless, he believes in humanity and patiently follows a socially useful goal. The mainstream film of this decade focuses on global issues. This can be seen both as an understandable reaction to a fact of electronically interconnected world and as the result of two whole society crises: threats of terrorism that after 11 September 2001 changed the world and raising interest in environmental issues due to media coverage of climatological problems.

Cyberpunk sci-fi *The Matrix* (1999) of Wachowski brothers was the first mainstream movie that outlined the contours of messianic hero suitable for next millennium. The protagonist of the story is a computer programmer Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves). Thanks to the contact with hackers, he learns that the world in which he lives, is a sophisticated computer simulation and only he alone is destined to save humanity. An important factor in film is the decision of filmmakers not to show Thomas Anderson as born-Messiah, nor the action hero from the very beginning. He had to painfully acquire his status (through mental and physical training), so that he could meet his sworn enemy. Another remarkable hero with the messianic mission was the hobbit Frodo in trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, and 2003). It is well-known that the author of the original novel, J. R. R. Tolkien, intended to create his fictional mythological world, The Middle-Earth, after Christian cosmology. Frodo feels like a pawn on a chess-board with much more powerful opponents, however it is exactly him who due to his own lack of political ambition tries to defeat the ultimate evil.

At the beginning of the first decade (so called 'noughties') three significant comics-based films were made: *Unbreakable* (2000), *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002). The third of these movies was so successful (production budget of the film amounted to \$ 140 million, box office grosses reached a record 821.7 million) that it became instant hit and determined long-term inclination of blockbuster producers towards comics books synopses. Since then, a significant amount of comics-based films were made: notably *Blade* (1998, 2002, 2004), *Spider-Man* (2004, 2007), *Batman Begins/The Dark Knight/The Dark Knight Rises* (2005, 2008, 2012), *X-Men* (2002, 2006, 2009, 2011), *Iron Man* (2008, 2010, 2013), *Hellboy* (2004, 2008), *Hulk* (2003, 2008), *Superman Returns* (2006), *Man of Steel* (2013), *Daredevil* (2003), *Thor* (2011, 2013), *Captain America* (2011, 2014), *The Avengers* (2012). New titles are emerging every year. Characters and plots of these films were developed by two largest publishers in comic books industry: DC Comics a Marvel. Superheroes, with

whom both publishers populated their semi-fictional universes, are the closest to the ideal of classical hero in terms of their attributes. They allow to their consumers participation in psychological processes of identification and adoration. The current trend tend to emphasize psychological dimension of heroes, therefore superheroes and messianic heroes from mainstream movies are much more deeper and rich characters, in the comparison to action heroes of 80s. Producers succeeded in linking three important aspects: supernatural origins or exceptional abilities typical for the classic hero of ancient times, dedication to help and to serve others as an important humanistic and religious value and psychological plausibility required from the hero of classical literature and art film.

Batman Begins/The Dark Knight/The Dark Knight Rises (2005, 2008, 2012) is the trilogy which meets such criteria. It was made by the director Christopher Nolan with Christian Bale as a main character. Millionaire Bruce Wayne lives a double life: outwardly, he acts as a swinger, but under the cover of night, he dresses up as a masked superhero, trying to save his home city Gotham from destruction. The trilogy aims to strong social meanings: corruption and crime fighting, desire for justice, superiority of evil in terms of its power or multiplicity. It raises several moral dilemmas associated with the determination to remain true to one's core values. The Batman films also shows the deviation, irrationality and hypnotic power of evil (Joker and Bane as villains) and touches the problem of painful past, which however becomes a source of moral strength and determination. Batman knows that the society in which he lives is not worth a lot, nevertheless he is willing to save it.

He rejects the simple solution of headless destruction of evil, which advocates his former mentor Ra's al Ghul. The exceptional feature of Nolan's Batman is his moral integrity. Latest technology and thorough training in the past provides Batman the advantage over his adversaries. He was able to turn his fear (phobia of bats) into a symbol of his own mission. Batman is a combination of self-made man and a moral hero. He does not hesitate to take the blame onto himself for an act he did not commit, because he believes that it will be more beneficial to others. He is neither invulnerable nor invincible. He wins thanks to the solidarity and assistance from others. We can clearly see that this hero meets all criteria regarded from hero as messianic figure: dedication to his mission, service to others, vulnerability and self-sacrifice. He is willing to bear the shadow of others.

The vulnerable hero can be easily recognized in a survival horror *World War Z* (2013). The main character is a former United Nations employee Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt), who finds himself and his family in the middle of chaos. The city of Philadelphia is attacked by zombies: raving, raved and ruthlessly malformed beasts are murdering defenseless people. They attack the healthy ones with instinctive relentless. The cause of global catastrophe is deadly virus that turns people into wild unstoppable animals. The infection erupted worldwide. Gerry Lane is in charge of tracing the origins of the virus so the researchers will be able to create a vaccine. He cannot refuse to participate in

this mission, on his willingness depends whether his family retains a safe place on a crowded military aircraft carrier.

Zombies are attractive for filmmakers because they bear various powerful meanings. ‘Zombie’ might be understood as the symbol of irrational powers that threaten the psychological integrity of a person. As the society is more technically advanced and the more it tries to organize its systems and processes according to the principles of rationality and efficiency, the stronger shadow it casts into the human unconsciousness. There sleeps brutal irrational forces that the modern man is ignoring or trying to suppress because they cannot be controlled. In a little more liberal perspective, we can attribute ‘zombie’ qualities to the modern man of mass society, who has lost his individual traits and merged with faceless crowd. His will, freedom and humanity vanished. Finally, the zombie is also an accurate symbol of man without spirit: if an individual refuses or displaces the spiritual dimension of his life, he becomes a ghost – a caricature of man or person.

Film *World War Z* also offers other social meanings: protection of family, fear of diseases and death represented by motives of global pandemics, theme of fatal necessity – helplessness against the forces that exceed human capacity of resistance, immigration politics and related cultural and national separatism, impersonal assessment of an individual’s values in terms of their ‘usefulness’ for social and political system. Primary motivation of the main character is to ensure the safety of his own family. Later, his goal reaches wider altruistic dimension (rescue of Israeli female soldier). The most striking moment in the film is a scene when Gerry Lane realizes that if he alone willingly infects himself with some deadly and dangerous (but curable) pathogen, he may become invisible to zombies. As someone who is terminally ill, he would not be a suitable carrier for the zombie-virus, which stole the soul of the rest of the people. The motive of self-sacrifice is clearly visible here. The main character takes the risk of death in order to save others. The hero of this film does not have any superhuman or narcissistic traits. He is a vulnerable hero, who is aware of the possibility of losing his life. More than by special abilities, he excels by his sensitivity and determination.

Perhaps this type of hero is most convincing for contemporary mainstream film publics. Vulnerable main characters were introduced in other films as well; let us mention *Avatar* (2009), *Oblivion* (2013) and *Pacific Rim* (2013).

7. Conclusions

The heroes of mainstream film had undergone several transformations within a few decades. What is the most notable element of this process is the cyclic alternation between the periods with the preference of strong hero and the favoring of the weak hero. The appearance of the contemporary hero contradicts the philosophers’ claims about the end of ethics of self-sacrifice [20]. We do not live in a postmodern society that can be described by a loss of faith in the grand

narratives and by painless ethics. We live in a global society, where we are becoming increasingly more and more aware of the responsibility for our own surroundings: whether social or natural. 'The world' is not indifferent to us, we are searching its meaning, and we are trying to find a proper relation to it. We feel that our civilization faces threat of devastation due to excessive consumption of natural resources, unscrupulous dominating plans of corporations, political pragmatism asserting the right of the stronger and favoring backstage deals and lobbying, technologies that cease to serve humanistic principles. Media are beginning to imprison their audiences into virtual reality and we all suffer from general loss of social sensitivity, which leads to violence – whether in the form of riots, military interventions or terrorist attacks. Man is well aware of the threats that he had caused. However, this rising self-awareness and related interest in civic activism is a good sign. The uses of brute force to oppress others by the power elites will be much more difficult in the world of empowered audiences.

Appearance of a contemporary hero with messianic qualities – who is an important tool of self-identification and social learning – accurately reflects these changes. 'Muscles and arms' are going to be replaced by 'empathy and creativity'. We believe that there is one more reason due to which the global change of social sensitivity and the awakening of altruistic attitudes are emerging: the terrorist threats. We do not live in a safe world, and this knowledge may motivate an ordinary person to actively participate in helping others and fellowship. Fruitless philosophical reflections on the nature of evil, doubts about the meaning of life, condemnation of general moral relativism and overall passivity are typical for societies, which lost their spiritual orientation due to abundance of material resources. Communities, whose people struggle really hard and strive for bare survival, do not live in 'moral chaos'. They fight for good with all their powers, with their whole hearts.

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