

THE HEROIC JOURNEY IN POPULAR CULTURE

*Dhruba Karki**

ABSTRACT

Popular culture integrates people in diverse settings. Individuals share ideas through materials they use, including food, dresses, movies, magazines, and holiday spots. In the past, people set for pilgrimage to holy sites; these days, they go on trekking through hills. Pilgrimages to consecrated sites have been replaced by people's journey to discotheque, fashion center and shopping complex in the modern time corporate world. What binds them together is the transformation of consciousness in line with the journey from the terrestrial to the celestial sphere. Specific human activities, including pilgrimage and business trip become popular culture when people make them significant parts of their lives. Sound and images of disco, jazz, hip-hop, and pop-rock have entered the streets and hotels equally in cities of the industrial world, from Lhasa to London, Karachi to Kathmandu, and Tokyo to New York, irrespective of their cultures and ethnic backgrounds. In today's world of saturated media presence, images and icons of heroes and legends, motivated by commercial and popular appeal, are circulated with a greater speed, becoming simultaneously a shared mythic currency and continuity, the modern world embodiment of silk road business, and thus, crossing the East-West divide.

Key Words: Popular, culture, humanities, hero, transformation, folklore.

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture is people's culture. An M Phil course on popular culture helps students understand everyday culture that they can imbibe through multiple texts, ranging from verbal to visual. Topics in this paper revolve across sports and advertisement, film and fiction, mythology and technology, and folklore and cyberculture. Central to the humanities program, Popular Culture inculcates in the university graduates civic sense of love and compassion to the humanity. Connecting the university academia to an ever changing world, this course assists to bring together the elite and the folk to the dynamics of the interdisciplinary interactions in training, knowledge and research.

Popular Culture induces students to theories and texts based on science, humanities and management. Through representative visual or non-visual texts of contemporary American along with Nepali culture, students make connections between popular culture and the dynamics of the contemporary world. This course equips students with skills to analyze

* Dr. Karki is Reader in English, Central Department of English, T.U., Kirtipur, Nepal

popular cultures from multiple perspectives and instills in them sensibilities of global culture by interpenetrating all disciplines. Citizens, including academia and students with insights of interdisciplinary perspectives share the prospect of education in a rapidly developing world of democracy and information technology.

Since culture developed together with the human species, it is shared and socially inherited. This course, crossing disciplinary frames of research and knowledge, disseminates interdisciplinary ideas and perspectives through popular cultures. Topics in this course are directed to prepare students as the most useful global citizens with a noble sense of humanity, aware of other people's cultures while practicing one of their own. Knowing other people's cultures heightens the intensity of your perception of your culture from different perspectives.

Specific human activities become popular culture when people make them parts of their lives. Popular culture incorporates actions in which people spend much of their time, money, and energy. Sports, movies, music, dance, blue jeans, electronic media, and fast food have become increasingly popular across the world. Sound and images of disco, jazz, hip-hop, and pop-rock have entered the streets and hotels equally in cities of the industrial world, from London to Tokyo, and those of developing countries, from Kathmandu to Karachi. People spend money and time in concert, discotheques and dance bars. Youngsters in red t-shirts and blue jeans with images of celebrities visit colleges and fashion centers. In today's world of saturated media presence, images and icons of heroes and legends, motivated by commercial and popular appeal, are circulated with a greater speed, becoming simultaneously a shared mythic currency and continuity.

Culture is then a methodological calculation of actions and expressions of people no matter which part of the globe they live in. Within a purview of Stuart Hall's cultural representations as interactive processes, John Storey, in *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, examines popular culture as more an everyday practice than an aesthetic manifestation:

Culture in cultural studies is defined politically rather than aesthetically. The object of study in cultural studies is not culture defined in the narrow sense, as the objects of aesthetic excellence ('high art'); nor culture defined in an equally narrow sense, as a process of aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual development; but culture understood as the texts and practices of everyday life. (2)

Shared by individuals irrespective of their geographic locations, culture operates as the textual site in new areas of the humanities of which popular culture is a significant branch. Human actions, behaviors, and materials of everyday use are considered identity markers of people living in diverse cultural spaces. Cultural icons and social events are mass mediated through video, film, and television, thus making them more

popular. Audiences face everyday images of Robocop, Superman, Batman and Spiderman on film and videos. Children and students in recent decades prefer their materials, including shoes, shirts and stationeries with images and logos of superheroes. Popular culture refers to common practices that unite people with similar belief systems, lifestyles, and worldviews. In *Popular Culture Profiles*, Ray Browne and Pat Browne define popular culture as people's activities and engagements, incorporating rite and ritual, myth and media, and feast and festival. It is what people do while they are awake, and what they think about and what



they dream of while they are asleep. It is the way of life individuals inherit, practice, change, and pass to their descendents (3). Understanding a people's culture requires a closer observation of their actions and leisure activities. Knowing specific patterns of lives and their belief systems allows observers to understand those people engaged in those activities.

Popular culture is not a product in itself, but a process of representing any cultural object. It is culturally constructed from interactive processes

between humans and media representations. Studying popular culture connotes an in-depth investigation into food the majority of the people eat, dresses they wear, magazines they read, and movies they view. In the fashion world, certain dresses, such as t-shirts or sports shoes become popular once they are worn by celebrities, and they become even more popular after the hero and the heroine wearing them appear in the television commercials. It unfolds connections between the hero and culture, business and aesthetics, and icon and technology. For an example, blue jeans are, originally rough dresses designed for American cowboys, have become fancy wears for special occasions for people of all age ranges. Similarly, fast foods, including McDonald, pizza and KFC have become special snacks for youngsters and adults and ordinary folk and the rich elite across the world.



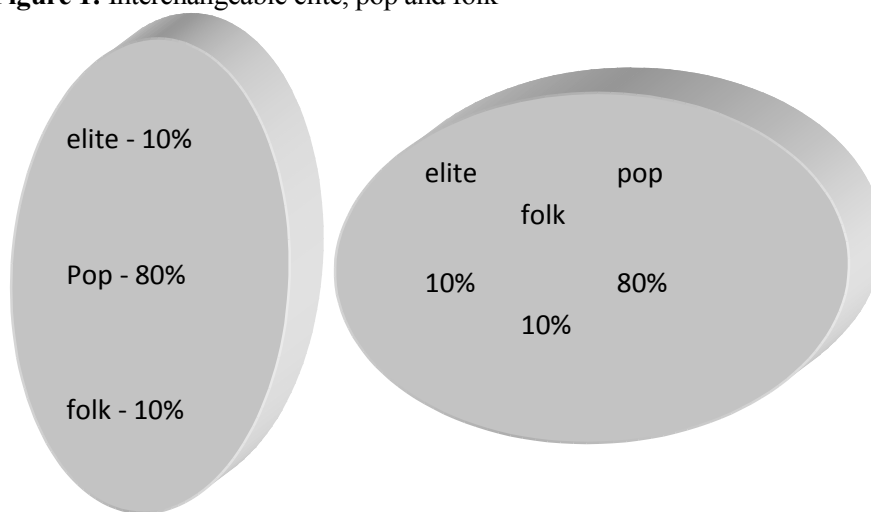
Likewise, the Olympics, the World Cup, television and video games, among others, have become popular among people, ranging from children to adults, from those in the developing countries to the highly advanced industrial world. Not only those sports athletes compete in

tournaments but also performances in television people watch become popular. Sporting the television, while viewing business company-sponsored sports tournaments, involves athletics and economics.

When presented to audiences through television, a folk song becomes popular. Similarly, popular song becomes folk culture once it becomes a part of everyday life. A massive use of technologies and electronic media makes many of the world's indigenous cultures popular. The faculty of humanities, establishing connections between popular culture and the fast changing world, needs to be revitalized by bringing together various disciplines, so that the university can prepare the human resource the market needs while producing ideal citizens with a noble sense of humanity.

Ray Browne further elaborates popular culture as the system of attitudes, behavior patterns, beliefs, customs, and tastes that define the people of any society. It is the entertainment, diversions, icons, rituals, and actions that shape a society's everyday life. It is what we do while we are awake, what we think about and how we approach the thought, and what we dream about while we are asleep. It is the way of life we inherit, practice, change, and then pass on to our descendants (3). Popular culture is the current mature extension of folk culture, the culture of people. With improved means of communication and electronic media in American culture, folk culture expanded into popular culture – the daily way of life as shaped by the popular majority of society.... Thus, popular culture is tied fundamentally in America and the dreams of its people. (4)

Figure 1: Interchangeable elite, pop and folk



Source: Isaac Sequira's Popular Culture: East and West.

Historically, culture analysts have tried to fine-tune culture into two categories: “elite” – the elements of culture (fine art, literature, classical

music, gourmet food and wine, etc) that supposedly define the best of society and “popular” – the elements of culture (comic strips, best sellers, pop music, fast foods, etc.) that appeal to society’s lowest common denominator. (4)

Popular culture is the way in which and by which most people in any society live. In a democracy like the United States, it is the voice of the people live – their practices, likes, and dislikes – the lifeblood of their daily existence, a way of life. The popular culture is the voice of democracy, speaking and acting, the seedbed in which democracy grows. Popular culture in all societies – from the most authoritarian to the most democratic – democratizes them and makes democracy truly democratic. It is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainments, diversions; it is our heroes, icons, rituals, everyday actions, psychology, and religion – our total life pictures. It is the way of life we inherit, practice, modify as we please, and then pass on to our descendents. It is what we do while we are awake; it is the dreams we dream while asleep, as well as where and how we sleep and how long (6-7). Popular culture travels through popular cultures. While watching the final game of the World Cup, audiences not only view the game on the screen but also the television itself.

Popular culture has nothing to do with popularity in the sense of number of people engaged in it. That kind of popularity has to do only with how widely something is used. It also has nothing to do with quality, though at times we might wish it did. Popular culture is the lifestyle and lifeblood of groups – large or small – of people. (7)

Popular culture has nothing to do with so-called quality, with the “good and beautiful” in life as distinguished from elements which are considered neither good nor beautiful. Some aspects of culture are positive, some negative, some beneficial, some detrimental. Popular culture, especially in a country like the United States, is the total of all ways and means of life, for better or worse, desired or undesired. (8)

The elite culture and folk culture are reversible, and elite or folk cultures might turn pop. When visualized, a folk song becomes popular, and so does the elite. People in all the primitive societies, whether today’s highly industrialized or those developing ones, had a rich tradition of pilgrimage which is now has been transformed into trekking, paragliding, or mountain climbing. Once the pilgrimage has now been replaced by the concert, fashion center, street festival. Precisely, the pilgrimage which once had a spiritual connotation has now been replaced by tourism. One can observe the idea of bringing people from different social strata and professional background together in carnival that breaks boundaries of the high and the low, rich and poor, and educated and uneducated. All these are parts of popular culture, and they have been pervaded by consumer culture of today’s capitalist world.

POPULAR CULTURE ACROSS CURRICULA IN UNIVERSITIES

During the 1960s, the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association were rigorously working to redefine the humanities program to incorporate the necessity of interdisciplinary relationships and information technology revolution in the real world. In *Popular Culture Studies across the Curriculum*, Browne reaffirms the formation of interdisciplinary and comparative interchange by breaking down the “disciplinary libido” (Marjorie Garber’s *Academic Instincts*, 2003) (3). Popular culture has become one of the most vibrant subjects in the new humanities ever since the 1960s. A pertinent program requiring sincere scholarship and rigorous intellectual debate in the American discourse, popular culture opens up avenues for an in-depth understanding of life and culture of the mass. Since the 1970s, it has become one of the most potential programs with interdisciplinary blend in American colleges and universities. It has become the program of interest of the university education system across the world ever since the 1980s.

Designed to cross disciplinary boundaries and departmental restrictions in the university curricular structure, topics in Popular Culture Studies form clusters of interrelated disciplines, including humanities, management, and science and technology. They include film, sports, music, dance, theater, folklore, philosophy, communication, English literature, American studies and popular culture under humanities; history, politics, economics, sociology and anthropology under social sciences; marketing and business under management; cyberculture and information technology under science.

Rooted in the new humanities in the university curriculum, popular culture regenerates the dynamics of the blend of courses in American studies, such as performance arts, ethnic studies, and women’s studies. Popular culture intersects courses in American studies in their shared ideals and values. Courses in popular culture studies have already been included in American studies programs, and vice versa. And both the fields in their interdisciplinary dynamics emphasize the need of revitalizing the humanities program by establishing and promoting mutual relationships with other schools and disciplines for a better understanding of human behavior and materials. The program in English Studies incorporates Popular Culture and American Studies with interdisciplinary bent.

Studying the Olympics incorporates the economics of sports, and multinational companies along with their commercials bring programs to audiences through television channels. Professional sports, sports tourism and tourism industry interface the economics of popular culture. There can be amateur athletes like those of the Olympics and those professional ones like those of the World Cup: the former voluntarily representing their nations in the true spirit of sportsmanship while the latter for

remunerations. However, sporting in the stadium involves money no matter athletes are paid and sponsored for their performances or they play to represent their nations or enjoy themselves. Similarly, the stadium blackmail gives an impression of the sports world's involvement in economy, politics, and community. Moreover, the game fixing and the match fixing reflect the other side of the black money involved in the world of sports. Beyond the economics of sports, there is a criminal case involved in sports, such as use of drug and legal action against the athlete.

At one point, folklore itself is a part of popular culture of a society. Folklore is the culture of the mass presented to people in artistic form:

To a large extent the task before us is to make definitions clear. Historically, folklore has been thought to be the life culture of the mass who make up the majority of any population's present or past. Folklore is the manifestation of some element of historical development, generally presented in an artistic form. It is nostalgia to some degree, a desire to revisit the time and place in which the culture occurred. People in any culture other than their own, wish for the imagined good old days, places, and societies. Folklore is a yearning to return to yesteryear, yesterplace, and yesterculture. (Browne 24, 2005)

At another point, Browne retraces strong connections between folklore and popular culture: popular culture and folklore are twin bodies joined at the heart and head, popular culture looking to the present and past, folklore visiting reality from the past to the present (Browne 26, 2005). When presented to audiences through electronic media, folklore becomes popular among people.

Anthropology deals with cultures of people across civilizations. Based on symbols, culture is all that is learned, shared and handed down from generation to generation over centuries. Like popular culture, anthropology encompasses the entire humanity. The four fields of American anthropology include sociocultural, biological/physical, linguistic, and archeology (Browne 41, 2005). Popular culture transposes those symbols of cultural anthropology to a large population. A young girl at the Navy Pier in Chicago or Thamel in Kathmandu wearing a locket with Jesus Christ on the Cross might represent her reverence to Christianity as well as her sense of aesthetics of fashion. Similarly, you could see young football fans wear t-shirts of Brazil, Argentina or England football teams during the World Cup.

MYTH OF THE ACTION HERO AND POPULAR CULTURE

Myth refers to underlying universal patterns of understandings and belief systems. Myth combines past and present, human and non-human, and individual and collective. In *Profiles of Popular Culture*, Browne gives two meanings of myth: first, the false, such as the myth of "man the invincible"; secondly, explanation of life, things, or people, or the world, such as the belief that material prosperity automatically brings happiness, and the American myth of success through hard work (13).

Similarly, there are myths of love, war, and the hero. The hero is one of the significant mythological characters, higher than men and lower than gods. Myth and the hero are the two of the seven pillars of popular culture in Marshall Fishwick's analogy. Heroes are builders, with their outstanding accomplishments irrespective of their personal interests, contribute to build nations, societies, and cultures. The heroic tradition and popular culture representations logically intersect, since the two phenomena operate concurrently, one complementing the other. The hero worship cult and the heroic representation are more global than local, collective than individual and emblematic than literal.

Popular culture invokes the unity and harmony among humans, and this paper unfolds a nexus among subjects and currents underneath departments in the university education system. The following section discusses the representation of the action hero in emerging popular culture currents at the turn of the century.

The term "hero" embodies a revelation of national identity. Originally a Greek term, it refers to the courageous person and the demigod, claims Kevin Boon (302). The Sanskrit term for the hero is *vira* (Hodous and Soothill 41), a brave warrior loyal to the authority, such as king and emperor. The Sanskrit *vira*, a valiant fighter, committed to society or nation, and the Latin *virtue* meaning "true" or "pure", a shared etymological root, connote an idealized person of action and audacity. Often used to refer to the hero, the Greek term *arête* connotes virtue and nobility, and courage and excellence (Miller 240). *Oxford Companion to World Mythology* defines the hero as a representative of culture in quest of a significant boon for his people (Leeming 178). In *Plato and the Hero*, Angela Hobbs considers Achilles, conscious of death at the fiercest battle of the Trojan War (1194-1184 BC), the hero in terms of courage and resolution (214). Homer's hero is audacious Achilles, and the Platonic hero a philosopher-king. Similarly, Stephen Halliwell highlights the Aristotelian hero's vital role in epic and tragedy (148). The lead character in a narrative, fictional or non-fictional, the hero with his exceptional courage to selfless actions embodies the best that humanity can offer.

The cult of hero worship is popular in all times and cultures. In response to society's need, the hero pays price for a cause larger than himself by voluntarily undertaking arduous physical actions irrespective of personal interests. An archetype of quest and journey, the action hero is a legend between myth and history. The action hero in modern times in rising above his personal self does not necessarily conform to the formulaic pattern of the Jungian archetypal hero or the Campbellian monomyth hero. Integrating the divine and human in a true spirit of sportsmanship, the athlete hero represents the rich cultural heritage in the

Greek civilization. In the modern world of informatics, the cyber hero combines genetically engineered body and artificial intelligence to save mankind. In James Cameron's *Terminator 2* (1991), T1000 uses his techno-body to save a young woman and her son. Similarly, the hero in Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* uses artificial intelligence combined with the computerized kung fu techniques to save humans from the recurring attacks of machines. Across the Pacific Rim, Steel Leg Sing in Stephen Chow-directed *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) secures a prestigious tournament for the Shaolin team by integrating his athletic body and kung fu action in the soccer field. Likewise, Nameless in Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) exploits his martial arts skills in the service of the Qin Dynasty (221BC - 207BC) and China of the future. Likewise, Krrish in Rakesh Roshan-directed Bollywood *Krrish 3* (2013) uses artificial intelligence combined with the computerized kung fu to rescue the family, marked affiliations with the Hollywood and Hong Kong sci-fi action movies. The action hero in popular action movies integrates the organic and inorganic, mythology and technology to champion the cause of humanity.

In these films, the action hero faces challenges on multiple fronts, integrating techno-body and artificial intelligence in the space-time continuum. The popular culture action hero, transcending physical limits and crossing material borders, invokes the unity and harmony among humans across the cultural divide, such as the East and the West and the high and the low.

In *Action Figures*, Mark Gallagher celebrates ingenuity and physical prowess in the Hollywood representation of the 1990s action heroes as champions of women, children, and capitalism (46). Gallagher stereotypes the savior male at rescue of the female victim while highlighting a physically strong man as the champion of people and the system. The image of the white male hero in rescue of the heroine resembles the twentieth-century action genre's melodramatic heritage. Gallagher, unraveling a relationship between the action genre and the free market economy, amplifies the hero's role to connect popular culture and the economic system. In a patriarchal society, men are characterized as bold and active and women cowardly and passive: the former is called to perform audacious jobs, and the latter to run the family and maintain order at home. In such a traditional social structure, the male controls the public sphere, such as sports and wars, while the female is subjugated in the private domestic domain.

The action hero as a popular culture icon and ordinary people's fantasy of a savior embodies human-technology interface. The hero blended with advanced technology redeems the world by saving the woman and her family. The hero is often given weapons, chemicals, or explosives, the products of men's scientific invention and physical labor.

The Nietzschean hero is the embodiment of the bourgeois tradition of industrialized Europe and the nineteenth-century western secular society. This hero with his innate power challenges the theological authority of God, and the heroic spirit that generates from within an individual transcends the mundane. In *The Overman in the Marketplace: the Nietzschean Heroism in Popular Culture*, Ishay Landa reassesses the Nietzschean secular hero:

The history of Nietzschean heroism runs parallel to the history of the bourgeoisie. The hero has accompanied the class like a shadow: a spiritual, psychological, aesthetic, ideological projection. He was the outcome of a radical transformation, a “paradigm shift” in the sphere of ideology, which commenced in the nineteenth century and culminated in the twentieth. Broadly speaking, this break meant continual withdrawal from the ideals and ethos of the French Revolution. (47)

The heroes, appearing as rebels in historic movements, replace the defunct social order with a better one. Similarly, the Nietzschean non-Christian hero, rising from the nineteenth century cultural and political transformations, becomes the twentieth-century popular culture hero.

In real life world, the hero responds to people’s need of a role model, an ardent savior at difficult times. In narratives, the hero addresses challenges facing society. In *Heroes of Popular Culture*, Ray Browne locates mysteriously romanticized place for the setting of heroic action:

Heroic deeds are generally done in mysterious places, where obstacles are as great as imagination unencumbered by fact can make them. This described the Holy Land in the thirteenth century, the brave new world in the seventeenth century, and the American frontier in the nineteenth century. Today, mystery dwells in outer space and on other planets. (13)

In the classical time, the heroic revelation has the divine emblem, when people were guided by a belief in God and faith in religion. In modern times, scientific invention determines the heroic action, when people are connected to technology as the invisible spirit. For an instance, the pop music heroes, including Bob Marley and Elvis Presly performed across the world with their highly sophisticated electronic guitars in the 1960s.

There are pop culture heroes as well as pop culture heroines. Numerous research works investigate the female heroes as heroes. In her introductory essay, Pat Browne elaborates the female hero in *Heroines of Popular Culture*:

Heroes have traditionally been male but this study reveals that females as well as males can fit the definition of hero as defined by Joseph Campbell. The hero must journey forth from the world into a region of supernatural wonder, he must meet with supernatural forces and win, he then returns with the “power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” Often, however, the hero’s quest or journey is a metaphor for the personal quest for self-awareness. As such, women as well as men can be heroic. (1)

Every historical epoch has a new frontier to explore since new words and strategies are required to direct people to cope with disorder and instability in society or nation. In such difficult times, the hero whether the male or the female rises in support to people. The hero not only explores the uncharted territory but also guides people to the unknown space. In Ray Browne's assertion, the geographic location for the hero to perform extraordinary deeds shifts from a medieval holy site to the outer space as a new frontier. The old values gradually lose their grip, and people need newer strategies to redirect them, resolve problems, and set a new world order.

The primitive world, be it the western Greek or the eastern Vedic, was more religious than the modern one, and people of that time were closer to nature than those of today. People in the primitive world were more inclined to spiritual wellbeing than material progress. The sanctity in the heroic deeds of those spiritually elevated ones was meant to connect the human with the divine. The Trojan hero Achilles is the son of Thetis, a minor goddess, and a mortal human. The Kurukshetra warrior hero, Arjuna, is the son of the king of heavenly gods, Indra, and the mortal woman, Kunti. The Greeks depicted their heroes as demi-gods as in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*; the Hindus identified them as in *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*.

In *Seven Pillars of Popular Culture*, Marshall William Fishwick examines the changing image of the hero over the course of history: "In classic times, heroes were god-men; in the Middle Ages, God's men; in the Renaissance, universal men; in the eighteenth century, gentlemen; in the nineteenth century, self-made men. Our century has seen the common man and the outsider become heroic" (61). Prometheus and Achilles are god-men in their connection with the divine and human, and Beowulf and Arthur god's men in their support to humans. In the nineteenth century, when the world had already seen multiple images of superhuman figure, heroes through their hard work and personal endeavors elevated from a level of ordinary people. The Byronic rebel and the Nietzschean hero acquire positions of nobleman or superhuman and become self-made heroes. The self-made hero often appears in fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway in the twentieth century who emphasizes value and money as the expression of power and masculinity. In the post WWII era, a common man, like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) without any connection with aristocracy and nobility becomes the hero. In classical times, the hero should have been of the noble birth and superior social status, such as a king or a lord, whereas, in modern times, birth and social class should not necessarily count as requirements to become the hero. Below is a review of literary works and

cultural trends that deal with the hero and heroic representation in diverse contexts in the space-time continuum.

Digital revolutions have changed the trend and focus of the representation of the hero in various literary and popular media. People have been taking images and models of the hero produced by electronic technology and popular media industry. The focus shifts from the spirituality of the classical society to the technology of the contemporary late capitalist world. The hero was previously empowered by the elemental spirit connecting humans to gods while the hero in recent decades is endowed with technology and cybernetic informatics. It is the magic that connects the spirituality and technology, the hero in the past and the hero in recent decades.

With computerized products, man has turned into a cyber-organism, with bodies and minds of protoplasm supplemented by photonics or electronics. Humans have become robots and cyborgs with electronics inside their bodies and computerized systems in their physical proximity. Computerized video games, Japanese electronic anime, and the Hollywood cyberpunk films are the latest developments in arts and technologies which are operated by digitized systems combining genetics and cybernetics. Representations of action heroes in many of these electronic video games and cyberpunk films pose both utopian and dystopian worldviews, giving people choices in their search for real identities and artistic expressions.

With this background of technological progress up to the cybernetic revolution in the latter part of the twentieth century, modes and processes of heroic representations have totally changed. Computer systems and sophisticated electronic technology manifesting in various media have prompted changes in the public response to popular culture's heroic representations. The idea of heroic representation in popular culture transformed from the mythical to cybernetic sphere, crossing the divide between the two domains. In today's industrialized world, science fiction, anime, and martial arts films have projected action heroes as mechanical bodies with artificial intelligence, magnified by digital technologies and computer effects.

THE POPULAR CULTURE HERO IN HOLLYWOOD

After the establishment of the United Nations Organization (UNO) in 1945, the Cold War was gaining momentum in international diplomacy and political landscape, ultimately prompting fierce competition between the US and USSR in the new frontier. After the two world wars, people around the globe could not afford another great war leading to the destruction of lives and resources in such a massive scale.

However, the US army's intervention in the Vietnam War since March 1965 resulted in tragic American experience with global implications. While the World War II instigated a rapid and concentrated re-vitalization and adaptation of the hero myth, the Vietnam War variously attempted to build and later question the WWII inherited hero myths in American contexts. In order for the hero to remain viable, he must transform and reflect society's milieu and cultural context that form myths of those people and their world.

Numerous speculations revolve around Hollywood's representation of the hero as American people's fantasy of the U.S. experience in Vietnam. In "Fighting the Good Fight: The Real and the Moral in the Contemporary Hollywood Combat Film," Philippe Gates critiques the first half of the 1980s Rambo film:

However, the new cycle of Hollywood war films since the late 1990s can be seen as antithetical in many ways to both these trends of the 1980s in heroism. The new Hollywood war film sees a shift from the war films of the 1980s in terms of the representation of heroism – from hyper masculine heroes to idealistic ones. While the realist combat films of the 1980s often employed brutal battle sequences to question or critique America's involvement in Vietnam and encourage empathy for the grunts that fought the war, the new Hollywood war film glorifies its heroes with their desire to "do the right thing." In other words, these are heroes who are simultaneously part of the "army of one"- a brotherhood – looking out for one another and individuated as moral men who think for themselves and, no matter what their orders, act humanely and heroically. (298)

Rambo, featuring Sylvester Stallone, reasserts the American military supremacy by justifying the rationale of American intervention into Vietnam during the 1960s and its repercussions in domestic affairs as well as international relations. The revenge hero, Rambo becomes an icon of an inflated, independent, if not renegade physical and action hero who uses fantasy as a way of engaging and rewriting the war in Asia. Rambo's heroic and mythic victory served to assuage American guilt, defeat, and loss of national self-esteem.

Action cinema poses the hero in the nexus between masculinity and nationhood. In *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, Yvonne Tasker examines the Hollywood action hero in the intersection of physical action and cinematic fantasy:

'Physical acting,' the cinematic performance of the muscular male body that has been associated most directly with such stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, achieved a new visibility during the 1980s. Stallone and Schwarzenegger vied for the position of top box office male star, presiding over what could be seen as a renaissance of the action cinema. The revival of the action/adventure

film also generated a critical unease which, as we have seen, centered on concerns about the politics of these 'heroic' narratives. (91)

Many of the Hollywood war films recreated mythic narratives of American involvement in the Vietnam War (1959-1975) rather than the actual defeat in the real battlefield. During the 1980s, Stallone's overly muscled and independent body marks America's efforts to revive the nation from the tragic loss in the Vietnam War. If the American hero did not win the actual war, then a fictive war would suffice. Not coincidentally, Hollywood star President Ronald Reagan, action film director Cameron, George Lucas' *Star Wars*, Rambo's Sylvester Stallone and the *Terminator's* Arnold Schwarzenegger become emblematic of the American supremacy in the physical prowess and technological progress. Cameron's *Terminator* in 1984, a paradigm shift in the Hollywood representation of action film, replicates how American was heading in global politics and technological innovation. In *Alternate America*, Booker notes that characters in *Star Wars* have been icons of American popular culture with their representation of ordinary folks using vernacular language (9). Luke Skywalker (fig. 2.5) of Lucas's 1977 *Star Wars* series appears as an imminent action hero of mass media, including film, video games, and television programs. In today's world, heroes like Neo in *The Matrix* (1999) and Skywalker in the *Star Wars* series share with Campbell's hero the circular structure of the journey and a transformation of consciousness while departing from the traditional hero path. The Force in *Star Wars* and Neo's ability as The One in *The Matrix* contain magical effects embodied by mystery and supernatural. The miraculous birth, the divine call to action, and the enlightened mind exemplify the invisible force, an experience once considered supernatural and now replaced by magic of technology.

The second half of the twentieth century as a period of heroic fantasy produced a wide range of heroes and superheroes as embodiments of people's lifestyles, customs, and tastes. Many of the Greek and Roman gods and deities have been reconfigured and updated as twentieth-century action heroes, idealized yet personalized to make them both heroic and human at the same time. Considering heroic actions and accomplishments, heroes and superheroes are mass mediated, proliferating and informing nearly every aspect of contemporary life and culture.

WORKS CITED

- Booker, M. Keith (2006). *Alternate Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, Print.
- Browne, Ray B. (1972). *Heroes of Popular Culture*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green U Popular Press, Print.
- (2005). *Profiles of Popular Culture*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green U Popular Press, Print.

- (1975). *Popular Culture Studies Across the Curriculum*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green U Popular Press, Print.
- Browne, Pat (2006). *Heroines of Popular Culture*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green U Popular Press, Print.
- Cameron, James, dir (1984). *The Terminator*. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Linda Hamilton. Santa Monica, California: Artisan Home Entertainment, DVD.
- Cho, Stephen, dir (2001). *Shaolin Soccer*. Perf. Stephen Chow and Wei Tse. Warner Home Video, DVD.
- Fishwick, Marshall W. (1975). *American Heroes: Myth and Reality*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, Print.
- Gallagher, Mark (2006). *Action Figures: Men, Action Films, and Contemporary Adventure Narratives*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, Print.
- Gates, Philippe. "Fighting the Good Fight: The Real and the Moral in the Contemporary Hollywood Combat Film."
- Landa, Ishaym (2007). *The Overman in the Marketplace: Nietzschean Heroism in Popular Culture*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, Print.
- Lang, Andrew (2008). *Myth, Ritual, and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Print.
- Langford, Barry (2006). *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Liamputtong, Pranee (2008). *Doing Cross-Cultural Research: Ethical and Methodological Perspectives*. Social indicators research series, v. 34. Dordrecht: Springer, Web.
- Li, Siu Leung (2005). "The Myth Continues: Cinematic Kung Fu in Modernity. Ed. Meaghan Morris." Ed. Siu L. Li and Stephen C. Chan. *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, Print. pp. 49-62.
- Leeming, David Adams (1998). *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero*. Third Edition. New York: Oxford U.P., Print.
- Storey, John (1996). *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, Print.
- Tasker, Yvonne (1003). *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. London: Routledge, Print.
- Wachowski, Andy and Larry Wachowski, dir (1999). *The Matrix*. Perf. Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, DVD.
- Zhang, Yimou, dir (2002). *Hero*. Perf. Jet Li and Maggie Cheung. Quentin Tarantino, DVD. Web.