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Popular Anti-heroes: Origin, Changes, and Influences

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of anti-hero works in recent years' film history and their influences on audiences. By incorporating evidence from academic articles in film reviewing and narrative analysis, this paper explores how film producers create novelty anti-hero images to satisfy audiences. This study demonstrates the change in the tastes of audiences by comparing the anti-hero film and television works and classic heroic ones. During the transition process, the differences and similarities between these two kinds of characters also demonstrate the consistent and changed representative ideas in reality. The background of these audiences from different cultures and languages is also considered as the variable factors of their aesthetic view and absorbed information since cultural differences and language barriers could twist the meaning during the information transmission.Through the analysis of relative academic articles, this study found the existence of different social factors, various propositions, and ideologies that cause these anti-hero images' creation and lead to the impact on audiences and their psychological changes. These varied impacts assert both negative and positive influences on them. Negative influence contains the pursuit and imitation of violent scenes and further change into morally- ambiguous ways of thinking, while positive influence includes stress relieving function and reflection of themselves or others.

Keywords: Anti-heroes, Audiences, Film, TV, Comics, Culture

1. Introduction

How can a character who spews profanity, kills a lot, and has ambiguous morals still gain many fans? This might be a mysterious question for many people who are new to anti-hero movies. They may even wonder why such a character presented as a villain could be the main character in a movie. In recent years, plenty of anti-hero movies, including *Deadpool* (2016) and *The Joker* (2019) and TV series, such as *The Boys* (2019), have been popular around the world, and the trend keeps getting stronger. More projects have been signed and renewed, including *Black Adam* (2022), *Deadpool 3* (2024), and *Thunderbolt*, which brings together multiple movie villains like its predecessors, *Suicide Squad* (2016). Anti-hero movies are not even limited to superhero movies anymore. The classic movie series *Fast & Furious* also brought the villain Shaw, who is starred by Jason Statham, back in the new spin-off set film *Hobbs and Shaw* (2019). Such a trend makes one wonder what makes such works unique.

How they successfully attract more and more audiences from traditional heroic films and their influence on the audience are the focus of this study. The significance of this study is to explore the

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tastes of the audience and the social, political, and cultural factors that influence them and their psychological changes through the study of this film genre. The method of this paper is to study the impact of such works on the audience and the market through the analysis of relevant literature and make the prediction of possible future trends. In terms of literature review selection, this paper chooses some case studies of classic anti-hero movie characters, such as Deadpool, Harley Quinn and the Joker, to conduct an in-depth analysis of these characters in order to explore the realistic social components represented by these anti-heroes, including marginal characters, mental patients, the feminism, and the change of female identity. Some literature also analyses the narrative methods used in this genre in film and television works and all kinds of arts, including Shakespeare's opera and novels. Furthermore, the article that analyses the fan service and market of film and comic-book also provides the relative background information and reasons for creating these characters.

2. Rise of Anti-hero Works

Anti-heroes are the protagonists of moral ambiguity, which usually lies between justice and evil. Some of their behaviors and purposes are based on values consistent with social norms, but other behaviors may be strange or outrageous. Generally, they seldom care about social rules and public opinion. In order to achieve their own justice, they will use more controversial means. Some of them even directly villain-like methods to fight against the villain. The difference between them and the real villains may be negligible. Since they have committed many illegal and immoral acts, they may still be called anti-heroes when they have some or few heroic characteristics. Sometimes they are simply villains, and some villains will fight as anti-heroes for some periods.

Protagonists in many anti-hero works come to the fore because of their wonderful supporting roles or villain characters. There are many famous anti-hero characters come from traditional American comic books and relevant adapted films and television shows such as DC's Joker, Harley Quinn from *Suicide Squad* and *Bird of Prey* (2020), the upcoming *Black Adam* and Marvel's *Deadpool*, TV series *Loki* (2021), and *Thunderbolts* (2024). From the perspective of role shaping, the transition from the villain to the protagonist is due to people's love for villains with unique personalities. In addition, one of the essential reasons they are loved is that they are closer to reality than those heroes who are always "hypocritical" and do not have any moral flaws by always making the "most right choice". The shortcomings and flaws of anti-heroes make them look more like those ordinary people because the audience is more able to empathize with them.

3. Anti the Routine of Traditional Heroic Works

The audience has been tired of some fixed narrative patterns for years of repeated superhero movie bombing. They believe that such heroism at the film's core has become a kind of Cliché. In fact, researchers argue they do not believe in the value of heroism anymore with the development of time and technology [1].

In the process of analyzing the famous anti-hero Deadpool, the research found that there was a kind of "dénouement reward" in its narrative process [2]. That is, instead of the traditional punishment mechanism, the anti-hero is rewarded for what he has done in the film.

Although Deadpool is full of satire and jokes, in essence, from the narrative point of view, Deadpool is still regarded as a tragic character in Shakespeare's operas [3]. As a terminal cancer patient, he has serious health problems. In addition, his experience of being bullied in the process of the medical human experiment also makes the audience think of all kinds of bullying in reality. His disfigurement after the failure of the experiment and the eternal torturing of self-healing factors and cancer corroding each other also remind audiences of related diseases. In such kind of role-building, the fact that he is immortal seems more like a curse to the protagonist. The neuroticism of the

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character and the still optimistic trash talk has become the reason why the audience like him. Through such characters and plot settings, the audience can empathize more with the identity of the protagonist. The character's various complaints and unreasonable behaviors also seem more plausible under these tragic experiences.

Anti-heroes usually mean tragedy. Their behaviors and thinking patterns without a bottom line are usually sequelae caused by extremely tragic situations. In *Deadpool 2* (2018), Deadpool commits suicide to seek self-destruction because his wife was killed by his enemy. Another anti-hero, the Punisher from the TV series *The Punisher* (2017), also has a similar tragic history. A character who believes that justice cannot be achieved through ordinary law because his wife and children have been killed by someone could always escape from justice. He decides to use illegal punishment for revenge and get his own justice. This familiar background introduction easily reminds people of the most famous heroes, Batman and Wolverine. In fact, these rebellious heroes were anti-heroes at the beginning, but with the increasing popularity and adaptation of various films, they began to turn into traditional heroes.

As previously introduced, many anti-hero characters have played villains or supporting roles before becoming the leading role in anti-hero films. In the process of series creation and movie universe creation, in order to prevent many exciting characters from becoming consumables, filmmakers will re-process them. For example, Marvel already set up a project named Thunderbolts that assembled many villains from former Marvel movies to conduct secondary creation.

This kind of reuse of characters not only appeared recently; Beaty pointed out in his article that Marvel had used such a mode in publishing comics [4]. He thinks that continuity is a key point in gaining new fans. If new film audiences have to remember all those different settings and role backgrounds in every new film, they will obviously be bored. By reusing the same character, they can more easily impress the audience. Such a production concept obviously does not simply serve anti-hero movies. To be exact, from the perspective of this service model, turning villains into protagonists is just a variation of conventional heroic movies for the market.

4. Audiences and Producers from the Different Cultural Backgrounds

Anti-hero characters are shaped differently in different cultural backgrounds. The researcher compares many Eastern and western anti-hero character creation and narrative methods in his paper. When comparing the Japanese film *Seven Samurai* with the American adaption version of *Magnificent Seven*, Hunter Burnett points out that in *Seven Samurai*, only the main character is the anti-hero, while the other characters are basically in line with the traditional samurai values. In contrast, almost all American-value cowboys have their own values, which look like an anti-hero. In such a different cultural background, anti-heroes may appear in large numbers in American values, while an anomaly in eastern culture is very rare. The local characterization has also changed a lot in personalities. After changing from samurai to cowboy, they are more confident from the western perspective. "American culture uses confidence, where Japanese culture uses Modesty" [5].

In addition, the author mentions collectivism in the Eastern context, in which the anti-hero characters are more likely to belong to a group. Even if they do things differently, they still work together as part of a group to achieve their goals together. This, however, is hard to find in early Western anti-hero films or even hero films. Despite the recent emergence of anti-heroes like *Suicide Squad* and *Birds of Prey*, individual heroism is still rife in Hollywood movies. Even though the main character and other characters collaborate during the process, there is still fist to flesh one-on-one action scenes at the end.

Different languages and the choice of translation can also affect the perception of anti-heroes. In an analysis of film translations of taboo languages in different cultures, *Saeed* (2020) uses Deadpool as an example. In different cultural backgrounds, the portrayal of characters and ideas will change

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with different translations. The reason why translation is not done in the full sense is usually to avoid taboos. The author mentions that alcohol is not included in Iran's religious taboo, so scenes and lines in anti-hero films will be changed. Many specific expletives are changed to a more generalized expletive in that particular culture to avoid a taboo [6].

5. Violence, Ways of Thinking and Imitation: Negative Influence of Anti-hero Works

The most controversial anti-hero works are bloody, violent and erotic images. This is the reason that most anti-hero works have very strict classification mechanisms. Many countries without the classification mechanism would cut many relevant scenes or directly ban them.

While R-rated violence in action and science fiction films can obviously have much impact on audiences, which are not familiar with the genre, for longtime action viewers and fans, the more there is, the better. The study found that viewers who had experienced violent narrative stories were less resistant to increasing violence in anti-hero narratives and perceived the violence as less severe [3]. People will continue to pursue greater breakthroughs and stimulation in the violent scenes that constantly break the lower limit. Therefore, addiction is very serious for many people who do not have self-control, especially young adults. Through their research, it has been proved that the violent behavior of anti-hero protagonists does not increase the negative impression of this category of audiences because the punishment is more attributed to the villain than the main character in such a genre. This narrative technique that serves the character is also one reason that leads the audience to identify with this kind of violence.

From the straightforward visual enjoyment of violence to the rationalization and justification of violent behavior has begun to affect people's thinking mode. As mentioned earlier, in addition to violence, the more realistic mindset, personality and background are also reasons for the popularity of anti-heroes. Not only will the audience empathize with these characters for their unrestricted realization of the same idea, but they will also even change their mind after watching the work.

The researcher argues that audiences love these anti-heroes because they are protagonists, and their actions are glorified [7]. Take the character Peacemaker as an example. In the movie *Suicide Squad* 2 (2021), he betrays his team and kills his leader for the national interest of the United States, and even plans to kill the children who are used as experiments to destroy the evidence. However, his TV series portrays him as a character who reflects on and confesses his previous actions. More of his background and history of abuse by his white supremacist father is introduced.

Although the creators have tried to get rid of these influences with all kinds of warnings and restate their purpose, these influences are real. How to reduce this impact still needs to be considered and negotiated by creators, communicators and film rating authorities.

6. Relieve Stress and Reflection: Positive Influence of Anti-hero Works

One of the things this kind of work does is relieve stress. Blood and violence are, in some ways, a step up from normal action movies. These kinds of visual stimuli that are rarely experienced by the audience can play a stress-relieving role, which is similar to horror films. When reacting to the trailer for *Suicide Squad 2*, YouTubers were all screaming and laughing at a scene where a man was ripped apart by the anti-hero character.

In addition to the simple pursuit of visual excitement, anti-hero films are essentially a revolt against various events in reality. In the DC Comics adaptation of *Watchmen* (2009), the anti-heroes take part in a Vietnam War massacre and kill a pregnant woman. At the end of the film, the fact that they still need to destroy so many cities to achieve peace shows the satire of their action and expresses the anti-war idea.

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When many ideas of resistance to reality cannot be expressed directly, the authors use more subtle satire. They incorporate ideas and values from within and outside the industry into their anti-hero jokes.

In Sandberg's article, he argued that Eric Kripke, who is the director of the famous anti-hero TV series *The boys*, believes that the superhero genre can be used in an ironic way because they are in "The cross-section of celebrity and authoritarianism"[8]. He thinks that although the character in the book as a German man is more rigid and representative, more able to reflect the terrible of the white supremacist is to make "cute girls on YouTube talking about how they are independent thinkers." One of the most ironic moments in the show is Stormfront's apparently false statement in front of children that white people are being racially persecuted. Such adaptations also suggest that many young people today are easily influenced by anti-human ideas wrapped up in claims of independence when they go online.

When Nedeljković analyzes the origin and ways of playing the role of the famous or infamous character Joker, he expresses a deep understanding of this character which represents the opposite side of Batman and his background [9]. In the film, Joker himself suffers from multiple mental illnesses and cannot control his laughter. After multiple torturing and mockery by society, he became a villain from an innocent victim. After asserting the creation background of this character in America, Nedeljković believes the nature of Joker in the film is that a "person uses all spiritual forces available to overcome the contradictory values of Faltering Western Civilization [9]. He believes that the uncontrollable laughter of the Joker is actually the mocking laughter at each other in modern Western societies that represent the darkness and negative side of society. This interpretation of cinema shows that the characters in anti-hero films are shaped by systems, events and values in the real world.

In the process of propagating values, the ideas that many anti-heroes represent are constantly fluctuating. Taking Harley Quinn, the most representative female anti-hero, as an example, her development in comics and films has changed with the values of modern society and represents the resistance of women against discrimination and stereotypes. Harley Quinn starts out as the villain of the Joker's sidekick and accessory. The relationship between Joker and her is twisted since Joker only treats her as a tool and does not care about her life or feelings. What attracts her fans most is her evil yet innocent personality. In recent years, comics, anime and movies have begun to tell her independently of the Joker. For example, her relationship line in *Bird of Prey* is to stop being blindly deceived by the Joker and find her own value after the breakup. This change in role represents a real backlash against the objectification of women. Liam Burke put forward a survey in his research paper on Harley Quinn and Comic Fandom and found that people think "Harley Quinn's growing independence from the Joker was a shared victory for Harley Quinn and her most devoted audience." [10]. This shows that such a change of setting and relationship is not only a single direction change from the creator but the change approved by the whole social group, including the audience and fans.

7. Conclusion

For the rise of anti-heroes, the reason they are popular is that their disadvantages and actions that are naïve or vulgar could gain more interest and emphasis from their audiences. Another possible reason that they are popular is that they already have distinct personalities and unique settings when they show up as villains. Narrates of anti-hero works did not actually change through the characters' setting. In fact, they still give these characters tragic backgrounds and start creation based on them. In this case, audiences would more easily emphasize with them and understand them. The design of such narrates and character settings is not an old idea in the area of fan services and the entertainment market. Adding similar pursuit of excitement to work can be very successful in generating more benefits for the industry. Reusing the characters also provides continuity for the audiences and saves the cost of designing and the filmmaking process. Although anti-hero works are universally popular,

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audiences and producers from different cultures and regions still could produce or feel different in this genre. Ideologies such as individualism and collectivism would change narrates, the settings of characters, and the whole background of the work in order to fit the values of audiences and producers.

The influence of anti-hero works on audiences is mixed. The negative impact is that elements such as violence would cause audiences to stay hyped, constant addiction and lack of self-control over the elements. They would finally identify with this kind of violence and even imitate actions. While from the other hand, they could release their stress through such a genre. In addition, since anti-hero works are not completely divorced from and opposed to the hero narrative core, the values they represent and the meaning they bring to the audience are also worth thinking about and reflecting on. The thoughts they represent are not only influenced by various thoughts in reality but also will again influence reality and continuous make changes and progress.

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