The hero in military education and media narrative: Possibilities of development of values by media education

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Abstract

From the perspective of imaginary studies, as manifested in diverse mythologies, the hero is the one who seeks to prove personal value in the face of hostile conditions, confronting apparently invincible opponents to defend people and/or communities. In this regard, we investigated whether the construction of the hero figure in media narratives is congruent with the archetype of the hero as manifested in the military model of professional training, which is based on tradition and the ethics of sacrifice, from the point of view of military ethos. The research method involves bibliographical research and an analysis of media narratives, which led to an elaborate set of guidelines for carrying out media education in the armed forces (in military training courses) to foster the military ethos. This research concludes that the concept of the hero was transformed after the Cold War, giving rise to the anti-hero, who does not defend collective values but contrasts with the figure of the hero typical of military culture. Considering the characteristics of new generations and the current challenges of media culture, this work proposes some guidelines for developing military values through media culture: role-playing exercises, production of media on historical figures, and analysis of moral dilemmas based on historical and fictional narratives. The use of narratives includes, but goes beyond, educational approaches focusing on media skills, since, in addition to promoting skills aimed at understanding and producing media messages, such narratives also emphasise the methodologies and techniques aimed at developing students' ethics and vision of the world with regard to military training courses.

Keywords:

media education, moral education, military education, hero, exemplarity

Introduction

This work aims to contribute to an important aspect of the field of security and defence: the formation of values and attitudes among military personnel, fostered through a process of military socialisation within the organisational culture of the armed forces. This is considered a crucial dimension for the effective employment of the armed forces following the end of the Cold War (1989), when it became necessary for military personnel to develop skills, competencies, and attitudes to operate alongside other military and civil agencies, both nationally and internationally. It is also important to consider the psychological and cultural dimensions of military operations.

Indeed, the current forms of peace and war transcend the conventional theatre of operations, which pitted national armies against each other on battlefields. More complex scenarios have emerged, where the tactical and strategic aspects of military operations intersect with several elements: the growing technological development, such as the military use of artificial intelligence, as seen in cyber warfare; and the psychological, cultural, and communication aspects, highlighted in the armed forces' dealings with the media and social networks.

In this context, military operations in peacekeeping environments, such as civil, defence, and humanitarian aid missions as well as peace missions, stand out. These operations require different attitudes and values from those associated with armed conflicts. Therefore, it is considered pertinent that military personnel develop, in addition to a military ethos focused on resilience and courage, "a new global civil society based on nonviolence, ethical considerations, multicultural respect, tolerance, social justice, economic well-being, ecological balance, and democratic participation" (Wien, 2009, p. 1).

Such formative aspects are relevant in both military training, focused on the development of short-term technical and operational skills for immediate deployment of troops, and the formal process of military education, which takes place in military schools. Both are tributaries of a common model of military socialisation based on military imagery, as will be shown later. However, they differ in the level of assimilation of paradigms and educational models grounded in psychology and educational sciences, which originate from the "civilian" world. In this context, it can be said that training is much more dependent on customary formative models than military educational institutions, which very easily integrate contributions from the curriculum and didactic theories developed in non-military academic institutions.

In this regard, it is interesting to highlight the possibilities of innovations in the teaching of academic subjects in military educational institutions, aiming to provide military personnel undergoing training with a better understanding of the various facets of armed conflicts and to develop military values through the attitude of empathy.

For example, the educational approach to war literature in military academies could involve a prior contextualisation of the history of war, considering the tactical and technological aspects as well as the social perception and emotional experience of combatants. In addition, active methodologies, such as group work and creative writing practices, could be implemented, based on John Dewey's "learning by doing":

> The students brainstormed the main characteristics of this type of poetry, naming some of the key words that are characteristic of these texts: disenchantment, trench warfare, gas masks, ironic language, sarcasm, devastation, tanks, mud, blindness,

etc. Following this initial brainstorming, they were requested to complete the next task: "Write a collective poem as if you were a young soldier writing from the trenches" (García-Cañedo, 2017, p. 381).

The use of didactic strategies aimed at military skills and values has been reported in various military educational institutions, such as in the teaching of literature at West Point. Its purpose is to develop an understanding of the complexities of command action in a war situation, even when addressing ancient warfare, as depicted in the *Iliad*:

> After reading the passage in which the Greek commander-in-chief transcends his habitual meanness and incompetence by valiantly leading the demoralised Greeks into battle in front ("Always King Agamemnon/whirling to kill, crying his Argives on, breakneck on"), the Cadet announced: Now I understand (Samet, 2002, p. 120).

From this perspective, one might question whether the customary models and formative strategies of military training and education within the school context are addressing the professional preparation needs of military personnel, considering the characteristics of the new generations, which are marked by two profound transformations in contemporary society and culture: the construction of personal values based on an individualistic ethic (Lipovetsky, 2005a), and the revolution in communication methods, with the widespread diffusion of the Internet and social networks.

The spread of individualistic values is part of a trend of cultural transformation that has been prevailing for decades. Such values distance the individual from the rules and ethical ideals of the collective, defending the legitimisation of pleasure, the satisfaction of the demands of personal fulfillment, and the moulding of institutions in accordance with individual aspirations. Individualistic values have also favoured an overinvestment in subjectivity, a narcissistic nature, which "coincides with the tendency that leads individuals to reduce the emotional burden invested in public spaces or transcendent spheres and increase the priorities of the private sphere" (Lipovetsky, 2005b, p. 22).

Thus, young people undergoing military training would no longer be as impacted by the heroic examples of military tradition, such as war heroes who embody the virtue of personal sacrifice for collective values. This aspect needs to be considered in disciplines like military history, which typically dedicate sections of the curriculum to the study of the biographies of illustrious personalities. The revolution in communication methods has significantly influenced the sensitivity and worldview of children and young people, distinguishing them from previous generations.

Before the digital culture, the formation of people's worldview was based on parental influences, neighbourhood/community, church, and school. To these was added learning through the social use of reading and writing, which occurred until the middle of the 20th century, when the traditional media of radio, television, and cinema became widespread. These traditional media also began to guide collective behaviour and standards of consumption. After 1980, cultural influence came from television series, video games, and, finally, the Internet, which took hold at the end of the 20th century, exhibiting different modes of representation and knowledge of the world (acoustic, tactile, visual, etc.), materialised through different technological supports, such as tablets and cell phones (Rojo and Moura, 2019).

In this context, streaming allowed the consumption of cultural goods *à la carte*, in accordance with people's needs and interests under the umbrella of convergence culture

(Jenkins, 2008). And in streaming, media narratives that incorporate the elements of oral culture, storytelling, and literary tradition are constructed (Santaella, 2003).

At the same time, transmedia storytelling spread. It is built on a complementary flow of content, permeating different media, which considerably expanded the possibilities of the viewer's intellectual and aesthetic experience (Jenkins, 2008, p. 138). In this case, access to the narrative can be autonomous, so it is not necessary to read the book to understand the film or play the game to enjoy the book. Another relevant aspect is that the transmedia narrative is a fictional account in which the relationships between the user, the author, and the platforms are deepened, since it depends on consumption and creation of fans.

In this context, media and transmedia narratives function as a powerful resource for the formation of individual imagination and institutions, as they are made up of images, which, according to Bachelard (1964), are the most essential part of the psyche; these images are impregnated with ethical and affective elements that are structured before rationality, throughout the process of training children and adolescents (Wunenburger and Araújo, 2006).

These changes in the field of values and in the modes of communication reveal how much the new generations differ from previous ones and that they must react differently to the processes of military training and education, which are based on customary devices and an ethics of duty and sacrifice.

However, the current armed conflicts are, in a certain way, close to the new generations. Such conflicts are also permeated by the communicational dimension. This is the case, for example, in the systematic use of disinformation strategies, as part of hybrid warfare, as evidenced by recent and current armed conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine (Ventsel et al., 2024, p. 1022). Hence, "modern military cultures in Western countries have a tendency toward self-steering practices and toward uniformed organisations becoming less insulated from the rest of the society" (Soeters et al., 2006).

Consequently, it is urgent to provide media literacy training to military personnel to enable them recognise and resist disinformation as well as conduct themselves morally in an appropriate manner, in situations where they often face moral dilemmas—conflicts between values. In this sense, media education can also contribute to the development of military values and attitudes, in view of the demands of military operations in contexts marked by complexity and uncertainty, such as in information warfare.

Starting from a reflection on these aspects, this work focuses on a specific aspect of the media narrative: the construction of the hero's character and its implications on the development of morality, since people can internalise ethical models based on exemplarity, for both negative and positive models (Magalhães, 2023; Puig, 2004).

According to Zagzebski's (2015) moral exemplarist theory, people search for moral guidance from exemplars, that is, individuals who everyone consider to have good qualities from a moral point of view, and there are two forms of developing morals and values, which are imitations and admiration:

> If I admire a person and reflectively endorse my admiration, I will rationally judge the person to be admirable in the relevant respect, and if I am right that emotions can be both epistemic and practical reasons, then my judgment that the person is admirable is a reason to emulate the admirable person, arising from my own critical self-reflection (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 152).

From the perspective of imaginary studies (Durand, 1994; Wunenburger and Araújo, 2006), as manifested in diverse mythologies, the hero is the one who seeks to prove personal value in the face of hostile conditions, confronting apparently invincible opponents to defend people and/or communities (Campbell, 1997).

In view of the above, how does military education work today, in the era of media culture? Does the hero archetype constructed in the rites and customs of military education still influence the moral behaviour of young soldiers? It is considered that the sensitivity and worldview of the new generations would be better characterised by the values of media culture than by family and school. In this context, what are the differences between media culture and military culture, regarding values? What are the common and divergent points between the archetype of the hero in military education and the figure of the hero in media culture?

In this regard, through a bibliographic review, this research investigated whether the construction of the hero figure in media narratives is congruent with the archetype of the hero as manifested in the military model of professional training, which is based on tradition and the ethics of sacrifice, from the point of view of military ethos?

Thus, from the perspective of imaginary studies by Durand (1994), focusing on the archetype of the hero, digital media theory, and multiliteracies (see Rojo, 2013; Santaella, 2003), this study aims to evaluate the hero figure in military ethos and media narrative, which has a considerable impact on cinema, video games, and streaming. Further, this study analyses, among others, the arguments of these media productions and some polyphonic narrative resources, such as quotation and parody (Bakhtin, 2002). With a view to analysing the construction of the hero in media narratives, a corpus of highly successful works among adolescents and young audiences was selected as well as others from the history of comics and cinema: the films *Watchmen* (2009) and *X Men: First Class* (2011) and the animated series *X Men*; Hollywood war films, such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Top Gun* (1986), and others, which have a focus on the theme of war and address the hero figure. These films were selected based on the criteria of artistic excellence and social influence. They were analysed based on a thematic critique that investigates the content of the text, the type of character, their main actions, and the context in which they evolve, looking for similarities and differences, from a comparative perspective (Pellini, 2007).

This comparison also served as a basis to provide guidelines for carrying out media education in the armed forces, transversally, in military training courses, considering the main aspects of youth didactics (Mesquita, 2020), to foster the military ethos. Students are usually between 18 and 32 years old, and their dealings with the modes of communication in digital media are intense. Thus, a consistent analysis of the imagery of pop culture is considered relevant as a renewal basis for updating and adapting some customary processes of military moral education.

The hero in military ethos and education

Military educational imaginary is embodied in organisational culture and military teaching practices, being the main component responsible for giving existential meaning to the personal and professional lives of military personnel. It is made up of images present in verbal language, rites, and military imagery that mark the reconstruction of the intimate self in military training schools (Magalhães, 2023).

Military education is organised around the archetype of the hero, whose origins can be found in most mythologies (Jung, 2008). Heroism is manifested in the military training

model and in the professional life of the military, which is arduous and pressurising: "strength and resistance to fatigue, the attitude of overcoming physical suffering and moral pain are virile qualities that are embodied in the military condition" (Bertaud, 2011).

In this regard, heroism is shown in military culture through the constant demand to overcome physical and psychological limits, inspired by sacrificial values. For example, soldiers must deal with the possibility of dying in the service. This is a characteristic of the military condition that has influenced military education and training since the beginning of time, as can be seen in the history of armies, such as the French, throughout the 19th century (Bertaud, 2011) and in war literature (Magalhães, 2022) until the 20th century.

According to Jung (2008), the archetype consists of images that are formed in the collective unconscious, being shared by the entire human race. In this sense, archetypes are for the psyche what physical organs are for the evolution of the organism. In other words, the archetypes would be residues or fossils. It can be said, therefore, that they are the result of a long process of adaptation to the environment, lying between biological and sociocultural dimensions, manifesting themselves, according to Bachelard, through images that synthesise the ancestral experience of man:

> In a dream, elements often appear that are not individual and cannot be part of the dreamer's personal experience. These elements, as I mentioned before, Freud called "archaic residues"—mental forms whose presence finds no explanation in the individual's life and which seem, rather, to be primitive and innate forms, representing an inheritance of the human spirit (...) Just as our body is a true museum of organs, each with its long historical evolution, we should also expect to find a similar organisation in the mind (Jung, 1964, p. 63).

The hero is an individual who seeks to prove personal value in the face of hostile conditions, facing apparently invincible opponents, to defend people or communities:

> The hero is the man of self-conquered submission [...] the hero's first task is to remove himself from the mundane scene of secondary effects and begin a journey through the causal regions of the psyche, where the difficulties actually reside, to make them clear, eradicate them in favour of oneself (that is, combat the childish demons of one's local culture) (Campbell, 1997).

The hero archetype, always related to solar symbols, breaks with darkness, in different mythologies: Prometheus, Theseus, Achilles, and Hercules. The hero embodies the mythical archetype of freedom of spirit, which is identified with a desire for transcendence, for breaking with a prosaic, banal existence, which manifests itself in the agonistic, aggressive impetus of a warrior in struggle: "It can be said that transcendence demands this primitive discontent, this movement of humour that reflects the audacity of the gesture or the temerity of the initiative. Transcendence is always armed" (Durand, 1994, p. 179).

The hero carries sharp weapons—a sword, a dagger, and a spear. Sharp weapons divide, separate parts, and are analogous to moral knowledge: they distinguish good from evil, through phallic and virile symbols. In this regard, there is no warrior conquest without the defence of superior values, since "the hero's weapon is, at the same time, a symbol of power and purity. Combat mythologically acquires a spiritual and intellectual characteristic, as weapons symbolise the force of spiritualisation and sublimation" (Durand, 1994, p. 181).

Hence, the deep symbolism of the sword, which consecrates kings in Anglo-Saxon mythology, was transposed to the ceremony of investiture of vassals, by suzerains, in the

Middle Ages (5th–14th century AD). Also, in the imagination of chivalry, heroes carry swords to kill monsters and save innocents, and from the spread of Christianity, chivalry was imbued in the Christian values of sacrifice and sublimated violence in favour of the protection of powerless people, under the aegis of the Virgin Marian principles. This conception influenced the narrative and iconography of Saint George, who kills the dragon, and then, in the following centuries, the construction of fairy tales in which the figure of the enchanted prince recurs.

In fact, the hero is the killer of monsters par excellence: dragons, snakes, minotaurs, deformed dogs, etc. He does so with piercing artifacts and a list of magical objects that protect him from danger: breastplate, shield, and barrier. All of them are linked to an intention of ethical purification, which is embodied in numerous practices of fear control and physical, moral, and psychological asceticism, such as hair mutilation and tonsuring. In this regard, it can be said that the renunciation of worldly pleasures serves to accustom the warrior to embodying a sublimated social ethic and enduring the hardships of the military profession itself, marked by violence, discomfort, fear, and the chaos of the battlefield (Durand, 1994).

For this reason, the sword became essential in the rituals of military training courses, in states that were constituted in the modern era (15th–18th century). These rites consist of a graduation held after the end of the period of military preparation, marked by the handling of the sword and the complex use of a close order drill, the culmination of which is the oath of the sword. Precisely, this commitment marks the rite of passage from student to soldier, recognised as such by the armed forces.

In military education, the archetype of the hero underpins pedagogy of exemplarity, based on the imitation of an ideal soldier model, which represents the finished and genuine model of military training. The characteristics of a well-trained soldier are professional excellence in the activities of the military profession, moral qualities, and leadership (Magalhães, 2023).

The archetype of the hero is inevitably masculine and is embodied as the essence of the virile educational model. Also, it is embodied, in the long run, in some qualities attributed to the ideal warrior/soldier, who became the paradigm for training young men after the spread of universal conscription, with advances and setbacks, after the French Revolution:

> Strength and resistance to fatigue, the ability to overcome physical suffering and moral pain, the acceptance of shedding one's blood to defend one's country are manly qualities that fully manifest the military being (...) the masculine identity is acquired in the barracks (Bertaud, 2011, p. 63).

The hero archetype usually materialises in the patrons of weapons and the force itself, who embody, in their personal trajectories, the institutional ethos. Here, the narratives of a pantheon of heroes play an important role, serving to inspire students' asceticism and rites of passage to a daily life riddled with deprivation and trials (Castro, 2002).

To prepare the soldier to face the extreme situation of war, which harbours the possibility of imminent death, the daily lives of students in the process of military training are characterised, therefore, by the overload of physical activities, exposure to cold or heat, and relative sleep deprivation with the pragmatic intention of adapting them to a situation of armed conflict. In addition to the pragmatic purpose of reproducing the chaos and destruction of the war scenario, such experiences function as a prerequisite for achieving the status of a "warrior."

Therefore, military socialisation, under the influence of the hero archetype, is made up of successive obstacles and acute moments of physical and moral discomfort that require overcoming personal limits. This is the case of the field training exercise (FTX), which functions as one of the indispensable initiation rites for the development of military skills and performances and for the consolidation of military professional identity.

The customary model of warrior education has its roots in the collective unconscious of the military institution and has persisted over the long term, as can be seen in the analysis of comparative literature focusing on the realities of war, in relation to the hero archetype:

> The hero's archetype is precisely the essence of military education. It can be modified in some aspects to adapt to the different ways to wage war and different national traditions. Aristocratic heroism included also the externalisation of a vital impulse, which enabled the overcoming of obstacles via the imposition of the warrior's superior will. Such dimension was passed on to medieval warfare when the tight formation, typical of ancient warfare, gave way to tournaments, man-to-man combat and the use of catapults. This can be seen in this part of the 13th-century poem about William Marshal, the Greatest Knight: "In frontal attack came Marshal in a sudden hurl, and with such fierce strokes and ferocious attack and throws, that the frontlet and the brake came loose from the king's horse" (Duby, 1983/1987, p. 144, Magalhães, 2022, p. 37).

Despite maintaining a solid, essential core of values and formative practices, the customary model of warrior education is neither static nor a historical. It evolves according to the predominant modes of warfare in a given historical period. These modes involve the coordination between different military branches and the types of command-and-control structures, which are shaped not only by different doctrines of war but also by collective management systems of military activity (Magalhães, 2023).

In this regard, it can be said that ancient and medieval warfare emphasised a sacrificial form of heroism, often incorporating death and mutilation as integral parts of the warrior's preparation process. Within the scope of Western armed conflict and military education, as considered in this study, the invention of gunpowder marked the first major inflection point in this educational model. It undermined the military ethos of personal combat as an indispensable test of the warrior's courage. Gunpowder also transformed naval combat as weaponry became increasingly precise and rapid, necessitating new training practices and gradually diminishing the moral imperative of hand-to-hand combat as a prerequisite for proving the warrior's honour.

Furthermore, the imaginary surrounding military education—constructed and transmitted through military schools and training within troops—also depends on different national traditions and the organisational culture of each armed force. In this sense, the predominant model of warrior education in the navy is not identical to that of the army (Magalhães, 2023).

Another important aspect of warrior education is that it has been, for millennia, a predominantly masculine paradigm, as the institutionalised inclusion of women occurred only from the 20th century onward, particularly in combat roles.

Considering military behaviour as a *habitus*—encompassing ways of speaking, walking, thinking, and acting (Bourdieu, 2011)—it can be said that the military *habitus* (gestures, psychomotor skills, organisational logic, combat procedures, use of uniforms, and

interactions between superiors and subordinates) was historically constructed based on male physiology and psychology, from both biological and cultural perspectives.

However, it is assumed that the millennial model of warrior education is undergoing flexibilisation. While still adhering to the dominant standards of martial conduct, it is gradually accommodating distinct ways of marching, addressing troops, managing subordinates, coping with operational stress, and performing physical preparation. This adaptation corresponds to the increasing inclusion of women in various military specialties and command levels.

In this context, it can be argued that the integration of women into the armed forces is likely to generate significant symbolic and functional repercussions in military organisational culture, training processes, and military education. However, these changes depend on the societal and cultural characteristics of the contexts in which the armed forces are embedded.

For instance, in national cultures that emphasise a pronounced distinction between male and female roles, the image of women plays an important role in the very definition of the military profession as a referential otherness: "This extends beyond male models of the 'hero', contrasting with negative depictions of women or homosexuals, which are often used to represent perceived weaknesses or inefficacies of recruits" (Carreiras, 2006, p. 36). This dynamic was also observed in a study conducted by the author on the perceptions of instructors at a military training school regarding the performance of women in military and combat activities within the Brazilian Army. At that time, the integration of women as combatants was still in its early stages:

> The rejection of female command in operational activities is so extreme that it is considered preferable to accept men with severe physical and psychological limitations than a woman with exceptional physical performance, who, in theory, could emancipate herself from the condition of being a woman (Magalhães and Andrade, 2015, p. 143).

From hero to heroic victim in pop culture media narratives

To place media narratives in the context of pop culture, it is important to revisit an aspect of the history of superheroes, which began in the 1930s. They may have emerged as a counterweight to the hopelessness and feeling of powerlessness of people in the metropolises at the beginning of the 20th century, during the great American Depression (1929). Poverty, mass unemployment, urban violence, and the uprooting of individuals in large cities, as well as the weakening of community ties, explain the need to build characters endowed with extraordinary powers, capable of dealing with such challenges. At the peak, aliens were created, like Superman, which first appeared in the comic book *Action Comics #1*, created by Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegelin 1938. Therefore, by mixing the genres of science fiction, adventure, police, and mythology, superheroes, such as the Phantom, Flash Gordon, Tarzan, and Batman, emerged in both comics and cinema.

World War II and the Nazi threat introduced new problematic scenarios for superheroes, who became soldiers to fight against totalitarianism and genocide (Marangoni, 2011). In this sense, Captain America and Blackhawk were created in 1941. Captain America, Steve Rogers' alter-ego, is a super soldier, the result of bioengineering that amplified muscles,

agility, and psychomotor reflexes, while Blackhawk is part of the Squadron, a group of pilots of various nationalities involved in special operations (Marangoni, 2011).

Then, under the influence of the Cold War (1945–1989) and McCarthyism, a process of deconstruction of the hero began (which is confused with the decline of the civilising role of the United States in relation to democratic and liberal values), resulting in characters like the Hulk, a direct result of the Nuclear Age (Marangoni, 2011, p. 8).

Hulk, another version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (by Robert Louis Stevenson), does not behave like heroes of previous decades. In general, he does not save people, institutions, or nations. He is a sufferer who atones for the sins of the misuse of science and politics, as he improperly manipulated the forces of nature, a constant of science fiction in the second half of the 20th century. The transmutation caused by anger triggers death drives, which are destructive natural forces like the atomic energy used spuriously by man. In this sense, Hulk's fury is a punishment that destroys all possibilities of human fulfillment for the wanderer-character, who cannot establish bonds with people or create roots anywhere, in addition to having to renounce the exercise of his profession and career. This poignant aspect of the character's fate is even more evident in the series *The Incredible Hulk*, broadcast from 1977 to 1982, played by Bill Bixby.

In addition, *Iron Man*, Anthony Stark's talented and arrogant alter-ego, is the other anti-hero of the Cold War. Inspired by the American tycoon Howard Hughes, Stark is an engineering genius, owner of a multinational arms company, inherited from parents who died in a car accident. He embodies the American values of fortune and mastery of science and technology, and occasionally defends humanitarian interests.

Iron Man is very different from *Batman*, a gothic character before the Cold War, who sublimated, in the Freudian sense of the term, the impulses of personal revenge of his parents' killer in favour of defending an ideal of justice for his city, Gotham City. He underwent visceral training, from a physical and intellectual point of view, to fight crime. The sublimation of the character's instincts is also evident in his obedience to a strict moral code that prohibits him from killing, placing himself as an arm of the police, in his partnership with Commissioner Gordon.

Cold War superheroes sublimated their death instincts much less and did not seek asceticism to become better people. Sometimes they do good, but they can bring more harm than good. They are tributaries of the Cold War, which is different from World War II—a fair, defensive war against the forces of totalitarianism, which brought together defenders of consensual values, such as justice and freedom. Conversely, the Cold War divided the world into two antagonistic camps, which precisely made the consensus of values to become problematic. This aspect favoured the emergence of controversial superheroes that are fractured between nature's destructive instincts, petty impulses, and sublimated ideals.

The Cold War was also the stage for movements demanding civil rights, which led to the construction of superheroes who were, mainly, victims. It is no coincidence that, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the *X-Men* comics from Marvel Comics appeared in 1963.

The story of this group of superheroes revolves around their fight against a world that fears and hates them for the simple reason that they are different due to genetic mutations (an allusion to the dangers of nuclear energy). Their powers manifested in adolescence, and they ended up being expelled from home by their families, which evokes the generational conflict and the rise of youth culture in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the series, Charles Xavier, the most powerful telepath on the planet, welcomes young mutants, offering emotional support and conditions for personal development in a school context. In this regard, it is interesting to analyse the prequel film *X Men: First Class* (2011), which tells the origins of the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Mutants, with emphasis on Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr (Magneto). The film begins in 1944, in the Auschwitz concentration camp, to show the horrors faced by Erik in developing his powers under the auspices of a villain, who is, in fact, an X Men. Next, the film addresses the events of the missile crisis in 1962, inserting the X Men's life-saving intervention, which results in the combined hostility of Russians and Americans towards mutants. This fact causes the Brotherhood to split between two groups: one destined to support humanity and the North American government, led by Charles Xavier, and the other destined to fight them, led by Magneto.

In Magneto's group, the attitudes and values of rejecting dominant aesthetic and intellectual standards in the form of inversion are revealed, from a psychoanalytic point of view. From being inferior, the X Men began to assert their superiority over non-mutant people, positioning themselves as "the future of humanity," in the words of Magneto. In other words, the inferiority complex becomes superiority. In this context, the mission of Charles Xavier's group, in a more conciliatory note, consists of affirming a "positive" pedagogy aimed at developing the powers of new generations of X Men and fostering a sense of responsibility towards humanity and the planet. Therefore, their mission is also about containing the excesses of Magneto's group.

The construction of the hero-victim of an intolerant and discriminatory world remained in the Canadian American animated television series that debuted in 1992, *X-Men: The Animated Series*. In the series, although the X Men eventually defended humanity against extraterrestrial threats and interdimensional beings, conflicts between mutants and humans predominate, as they are considered a threat. It is a considerable change in the construction of the heroic character. He becomes resentful and a victim of the world. Often, the hero even fights against him, to save himself. It is an inversion of the Superman character, who is not human, but whose mission is to save humanity.

The fact is that we live in the era of victims and not heroes, which is manifested in media narratives: comics, cinema, open television series, and streaming, in addition to video games and transmedia narrative, which is discussed next. The decline of the hero as it was before the Cold War reached a paroxysm in the film *Watchmen* (2009), in the form of a melancholic parody, built from the remix of various comics and superhero films. The plot of the film, which takes place in 1986, is permeated by the fear of nuclear war. The film focuses on a group of superheroes prevented from acting due to the Keene Act, which outlawed vigilantes who "retired," except for those who worked for the American government, in a spurious way, Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian.

The crisis of the hero figure is evident in the virtuosic flashback of the history of superheroes unfolding in the first 5 minutes of the film. The flash back incorporates the graphic signature of comics and powerful quotation resources indicating that the superheroes of the past are polyphonically opposed to the hero's current trend of hiding in the shadows (Fiorin, 2016). From this perspective, Cold War heroes contest tradition and the powers that be, which are perceived as oppressive instances that victimise the hero himself. Furthermore, they also do not develop asceticism in the sense of overcoming their psychological and physical limitations in favour of collective values.

From the above, one can observe a process of deconstruction of heroism, which emerged in pop culture, particularly in comic books but later reached the cinema through DC

Comics and Marvel. However, when considering the portrayal of heroes in war films, a nuanced characterisation of heroism emerges, one that aligns more closely with the concept of heroism intrinsic to military education and training.

In war cinema, the deconstruction of the hero was carried out even more profoundly than in comic books, driven by a pacifist, anti-war, and tragic vision. This is evident in the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Created during the counterculture movement of the 1960s, its screenplay was written by the American John Milius, based on the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. The novel, set in 19th-century Congo, exposes the horrors of the Belgian colonial empire.

Like Conrad's work, *Apocalypse Now* relies on a narrator-character recounting the events in flashback—Captain Benjamin Willard, played by Martin Sheen—but during the Vietnam War. He is assigned a dangerous and secret mission by the high command of the US Army: to eliminate Colonel Kurtz, a character inspired by the namesake from *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz had supposedly broken with the European, colonial worldview, internalising the death drives of Cambodian culture. Having established himself as a tribal leader running a regime of terror, he posed a threat to the American mission in the region. This military operation encapsulates the critical elements of the hero's crisis, as Kurtz, a decorated Special Forces officer, betrayed the nation's ideals. From an identity perspective, cultural belonging is a crucial aspect of military heroism in the age of nation-states.

This film inaugurated a lineage of anti-heroic Vietnam War movies: *Platoon* (1986), directed by Oliver Stone; *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), by the same director; and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), directed by Stanley Kubrick. Unlike the others, Kubrick's film depicts military training processes, in this case for the Marine Corps, focusing on soldiers and their conflicts with an abusive instructor.

Full Metal Jacket subverts the hero's image, exposing the cruelty and sadism of military training, suggesting that such an educational model cannot forge heroes. In *Top Gun* (1986), the opposite is portrayed, presenting military training in a positive light. Set in an elite US Navy school, the film follows the personal growth of Maverick (Tom Cruise), a rebellious pilot who favours risky aerial manoeuvres, his relationships with peers, and a romance with an instructor. The film's producer, John Davis, stated that *Top Gun* was practically a recruitment video for the US Navy, which placed recruitment booths in some cinemas to attract potential recruits.

The difference in how the hero is treated in films from the same period is primarily due to the wars they reference. The Vietnam War is not considered a "just war," rendering the notion of heroism untenable. Meanwhile, *Top Gun*'s educational setting, relatively removed from real missions, preserves the mystique of military education and training and, consequently, the hero's image.

A few years later, the US film industry continued this trend, focusing on the quintessential just war: World War II, which "ultimately occupy a similar place in the American consciousness: a remote epic filled with symbols and nostalgia" (Samet, 2020). *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), directed by Steven Spielberg, constructs an idealised representation of the American soldier. Landing in Normandy on 6 June 1944, Captain Miller, played by Tom Hanks, is tasked with leading a group to rescue Private James Ryan, the youngest of four brothers, three of whom had already died in combat. They must find Private Ryan and ensure his safe return home.

Thus, it becomes evident that the hero figure is somewhat preserved in late 20th- and early 21st-century war films, particularly those depicting training schools or theatres of operation during World War II. This is also reflected in the series *Band of Brothers* (2001), which is based on true stories and achieved significant success.

However, contemporary war films and streaming productions on conflicts in the Middle East do not portray a positive image of the military hero. Some films adopt a documentary-like perspective, highlighting the daily hardships of armed conflict in the Middle East. One example is *The Hurt Locker* (2008), a harrowing, low-budget film by Kathryn Bigelow, which depicts the daily life of a bomb disposal unit in Baghdad.

Other media productions critique US defence policies, blurring the lines between perpetrators and victims and sometimes portraying terrorists as victims. An example is the series *Homeland* (2011), developed by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, based on the Israeli series *Prisoners of War* by Gideon Raff. The series features Carrie Mathison, a CIA operations officer, engaging in counterterrorism missions.

Media education in military education and values

This outline of the various ways in which heroes are constructed in the media production of comics, cinema, and streaming highlights how complicated it is to transmit the values of heroism and self-improvement to new generations, in the context of military education and training.

In this regard, it is important to emphasise the strategies for teaching values in the armed forces education system, preserving traditions but also using innovative strategies. And in view of the increasing diffusion of the media, it is necessary to incorporate media education concepts and procedures. Teachers and instructors would need to promote open dialogues on the topic, seeking to understand how the impact of the media can be reflected in educational processes, including the formation of a worldview and values, which are crucial in military professionalisation.

Based on the author's experience within the Brazilian army and the country's armed and auxiliary forces, it was observed that media education practices are incipient, depending on isolated initiatives by a few instructors and teachers. Recently, for example, some guidelines were established for the use of artificial intelligence by the Brazilian Army (Ministério da Defesa Brasil, 2024), with vague implications for teaching. In this regard, it is important to highlight that the operational use of artificial intelligence is a restricted part of media education.

In this debate, it is also necessary to consider the way in which the various generations deal with the media. For example, cadets and other students at training schools were born immersed in technology and belong to the so-called Z and Alpha generations, born after 2010, and can be considered digital natives, since they know everything about video games, have mastered the language of hypertexts (links), and are able to perform several tasks simultaneously (watch videos, download music, download new applications for their cell phone, chat with friends on chats and social networks, and even do the research that the English teacher asked them to do) (Santaella, 2017, p. 17).

The baby boomers, born after World War II, would be the general officers in the last rank. They experienced the diffusion of television and had more opportunities for social

advancement (Huelsen, 2017). The next generation, X, who are currently 50 years old, are now colonels or general officers and hold great decision-making power in the armed forces. They experienced the transition from television to the Internet and witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989). They witnessed the crisis of political ideologies, the spread of divorce, and the massive entry of women into the job market. Next, generation Y holds senior officer positions. They inherited better conditions of access to the consumer society, as an only child or having, at most, one sibling, and grew up with digital media. Next comes generation Z, characterised by greater use of computer-mediated communications (CMCs) and social networks, such as TikTok and WhatsApp (Rocha and Santaella, 2017).

The construction of values and attitudes in new generations, under the aegis of digital culture, shows that if some values, such as honesty, responsibility, and freedom, remain throughout the generations, the order of priority changes. Young people would currently be more individualistic, less patient, and would emphasise freedom and autonomy more (Jorgensen, 2003). However, integrated into civil society and digital culture, these students must go through, as already described, the military training process, which is arduous, permeated with obstacles, deprivations, and trials, to prepare themselves to face conflict situations, armed or public calamity, marked by chaos and risk to life (Magalhães, 2023).

In this context, what would be the appropriate media education strategies to be implemented in the teaching system of military training schools, with a view to fostering the archetype of the hero, which is essential for their professional performance?

Such teaching procedures should be based on the principles of youth teaching (Mesquita, 2020), which treats young people based on the needs and interests of their generation, which, at times, diverge from the mindset of instructors, monitors, and teachers. From this perspective, the importance of understanding the youth phase as an important period of development and transformation stands out. At this phase, educators can play a fundamental role in guiding and training students by using dynamic and fun-centred teaching (methodological dimension), which favours teacher–student interaction (relational dimension) and awakens the meaning of learning (motivational dimension) (Mesquita, 2018).

These issues go far beyond the institutionalised use of teaching in the Army, which tends to emphasise an instrumental vision centred on teaching techniques and digital technologies. In this case, in addition to interdisciplinary curricula and collaborative environments, it is necessary to encourage the construction of personal meanings in relation to school content, in addition to the obligation to succeed in summative assessments.

From the point of view of media education, it is necessary for military training schools to inculcate in young people the technical skills of multiliteracies and operational dealing with digital platforms. Also, such schools should generate situations in which young people also position themselves in relation to digital texts, in the sense to evaluate its production and circulation context, its semantic aspects and values. This aspect is fundamental to adequately carrying out military moral education, which no longer works based on complete immersion through boarding school, as in the past.

To this end, in military training schools, listening and narrative creation activities involving exemplary ethical models should be encouraged. Some of these practices are customary, such as writing texts about important historical figures in the history of the armed forces. However, they have become routines, emptying themselves of vitality and meaning for young people. A good idea would be to ask students to produce messages through the creative use of digital tools, editing videos and podcasts about the patrons, to be

published in the school's magazines and newspapers, in contests or competitions. This didactic device could be extended to contemporary behavioural models of military personnel involved in peace and war missions in which they were prominent.

Films and documentaries that portray historical events, exemplary military leaders, significant operations, and ethical dilemmas can be used; they constitute powerful tools for teaching strategy, military history and philosophy, highlighting values such as courage, leadership, and resilience.

Critical analysis of films and books with a focus on heroic ethical models, both positive and negative, can be carried out in discussions conducted in Portuguese language regarding leadership disciplines, with the aim of unveiling codes, genres, and narrative structures related to construction of the hero, to develop in students the moral casuistry that is essential to the process of forming a military identity.

The moral dimensions of the military profession can also be found in films, series, and books of the fantastic, fantasy, and science fiction genre, such as *Game of Thrones* and *Star Trek*, when they focus on characters whose duties are typical of the military universe. Examples include Brienne of Tarth, who has a strong sense of honour, and Captain Kirk and the like, who behave like leaders.

The analysis of the semiotic and narrative structure of media narratives could be carried out in the classroom through the so-called "deliberation practices," which are activities in which the student can make arguments about what is correct or incorrect, fair or unfair, thereby developing a method of thought to judge moral situations, considering the points of view and interests of everyone involved. Such activities can also foster attitudes of respect for others and tolerance (Puig, 2004).

In this regard, such situations should involve moral dilemmas, which highlight specific circumstances of conflict between values, highlighting what makes a good and bad soldier by staging the institutional circumstances that soldiers face in their decision-making process (which is usually permeated by possibly nonsense values and attitudes), such as the choice between initiative and discipline. From this perspective, the use of narratives would allow the understanding of the circumstances faced by the characters through the following question: "if it were you, what would you do in this situation?"

In the same way, role-playing exercises and the role-playing game (RPG) itself, whether bookish or digital, carried out based on media narratives, would also function as dramatisation activities in which students would alternate between different social roles. Subsequently, they would discuss the various issues and points of view involved in the proposed situation, which would be better understood precisely through the development of empathy brought about by the use of this technique.

In all these cases, the psychological construction of the hero archetype could be encouraged through the contextualised analysis of heroic (or non-heroic) behaviours found in the narratives. This would be a more efficient strategy than listening only, passively, to narratives of heroes.

Therefore, the use of narratives can be implemented within the scope of media education in military schools, serving the purpose of professional military education, with the aim of developing military values and attitudes. In this sense, the use of narratives includes, but goes beyond, educational approaches focusing on media skills, since, in addition to promoting skills aimed at understanding and producing media messages, such narratives

also emphasise the methodologies and techniques aimed at developing students' ethics and vision of the world regarding military training courses.

In short, the use of media narratives for the formation of heroics in military ethos can play a significant role in conveying the values, ideals, and behaviours expected of military personnel. They are powerful pedagogical tools, as they not only narrate historical events and combat experiences but also help to build perceptions about what it means to be a military hero, thereby strengthening identity and cohesion within the armed forces. In these narratives, soldiers can find inspiration, understanding, and a sense of purpose to face future challenges of the military profession. In this sense, media narratives can contribute to the revitalisation and adjustment of the customary devices of military education under the aegis of the hero archetype, adapting them to the characteristics of new generations, characterised by media culture.

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