The Evolution of Mythology: the de facto lens of Modernity

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The audio visual bubble of myth surrounds us, the marriage between visuals and sound created a space which humans have used to recreate the surrounding world. Myth is so prevalent in our day to day life that it is essential in our definition of the world around us. Myth shapes our thinking, molds our minds and twists the fabric of reality into a paradoxical myth unto its own. Humanity relies on the cyclical nature of history, the constant repetition of events in more modern times. This obsession with repetition, relying on the known past to direct the actions of the now is the essence and functionality of myth. Roland Barthes argues that myth is not a naturally occurring phenomenon and is constructed out of the desire to influence. According to him: "(...) the very end of myths is to immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order which has fixated once and for all the hierarchy of possessions."[1] Our capitalist society has transformed the act of storytelling into something to be bought and sold, it is used to push ideals and agendas through the means of mass consumption. Film is the conduit for the "false nature" that Barthes states we are all functioning under, throwing society headlong into the simulacrum that Beaudrillard states "renders obsolete the idea of an original."[2] He posits that myth is a form that confines and defines what a person can do, it pre charged objects so that the world around us is limited to these predestined moments and choices, all "locked up under the pretext of being eternalized(...)."[3] The following paragraphs will attempt to define myth, explore its modern application and elaborate on the paradoxical relationship to the written word and film, how film seemed to be a predestined art form, while examining how the cyclical nature of humanity demands the construction of a simulacrum. Through the written text of Beowulf, the Odyssey and the Bible, the paintings in the Arena Chapel and the modeling in Pompeii, film is

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[1] Barthes and Lavers, "Mythologies," 104.

[2] Durham and Kellner, "Media and Cultural," 448.

[3] Barthes and Lavers, "Mythologies," 104.

an evolution of art that had years of mythos and technique that culminated into this modern, ultimate form of expression. The expansion of myth propagated by the technological advancements of the scientific revolution, that birthed film as a medium, has paved the way for myth to become ingrained into our collective consciousness and, from ca. 2150 with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to now*,* the understanding of the world is perceived through the lens of the myth. This paper will challenge Baudrillard's "vision of a fragmented and hyperreal society"[4] and venture into the supposition that there has never been a cognizant time before mythos, rather than the steady decline into the map of the medium, society has always functioned under the guise and explanations of the narrative myth, film and the modern media has simply allowed for it to be disseminated globally.

There is no culture in the world that is exempt from myth, they all had and have some form of mythology. It is common in the West to associate myth with the ancient Greek and Roman stories but, as written by Joshua J. Mark:

> The tale of Prometheus the fire-bringer and teacher of humanity is echoed in the Chinese tale of Fuxi. The story of Nuwa and her creation of human beings in China resonates with another from the other side of the world: the story of creation from the *Popol-Vuh* of the Maya in which humans are created who can do nothing and prove useless but, in the Maya story, are destroyed and the gods then try again.[5]

These existential themes of origin and rebirth are common threads in mythologies across the globe. Through the Egyptian story of Osiris, the Greek tales of Dionysis and Persephone, the aforementioned Sumerian fable of Gilgamesh, we can see attempts to grasp the concept of; where did I come from and what is my purpose, that are explored through each myth. That is

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[4] Durham and Kellner, "Media and Cultural," 447.

[5] Mark, "Mythology."Ancient History Encyclopedia.

why we see such a commonality between the stories told by cultures unaware of each other, by societies so different in tradition but strikingly similar in their attempts to comprehend the existential. "Our culture continues to be text-based, which means that the images remain attached to a narrative and do not exist on their own, outside of a story."[6] The collective understanding of ancient mythos is directly tied to the visual world.

As José Manuel Losada writes: "In past ages, mythic narrative has undergone several adaptations to new formats: from theatrical or epic representations to plastic image and the musical sound"[7] myth has survived and adapted formats over the ages. However, before diving into the complex relationship between film and myth, it is important to establish a common definition for myth for the purpose of this paper. José Manuel Losada proposes a definition of myth that encompasses its power in both the modern age and times past. His definition of myth is as follows:

> Explanatory, symbolic and dynamic account of one or various personal and extraordinary events with transcendent referent, that lacks in principle of historical testimony; is made up of a series of invariant elements reducible to themes submitted to crisis; that presents a conflictive, emotional and functional character, and always refers to an absolute cosmogony or eschatology either particular or universal.[8]

Themes of eschatology, the end of the world or end of time, and cosmogony, the origin of the universe or the "single act of creation,"[9] are common threads that mythological stories follow. According to this definition, myths must address either the aforementioned apocalypse, the birth

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[6] Zupancic, "Films, the Visual, and," 4.

[7] Losada and Lipscomb, "Myth and Audiovisual Creation," 7.

[8] Losada and Lipscomb, "Myth and," 20.

[9] Tim, "Cosmogony and Origin," Philosophy & Philosophers

of the universe, have a protagonist whose journey ventures into the uncanny and pushes them into a deep, reflective conflict that connects emotionally and yet remains fully functional as an individual, to qualify as a genuine myth.

The Greco-Roman mythology was so powerful and so omnipresent in the peak of their civilization that the rise of the Christian Church couldn't squash their might but rather, had to incorporate their ideals into their own mythos. The same could not be said for the myth's present in the North of Europe, due to their oral tradition, the Church managed to wipe out a vast majority of their storytelling. However, the few written pieces, such as *Boewulf*, persisted and thus the Germanic Gods are cemented in the history of myth.[10] Even if someone in the Western world has not read Beowulf, they are influenced by its affluence through the days of the week. "Our modern weekday names still show evidence of Anglo-Saxon paganism; Wednesday is from the Anglo-Saxon Wōdnesdæg ("Woden's day," named for the god parallel to the Norse Odin), and Thursday derives from Þūnresdæg ("Thunor's Day," for the god Icelanders called Thor)."[11] This is a prime example of how mythos has interwoven itself into our everyday perception of the world. The text of Beowulf itself is an indistinguishable mix of fact and fiction that J.R.R. Tolkien wrote: "surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods."[12] Due to it's message being active and applicable to modern issues and situations. Myth has bled into every art form since it's conception.

Myth is present on *The Palette of King Narmer,* on *Khafre Enthroned,* in *Hermes and the infant Dionysos,* in *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey,* in the the *Hagia Sophia,* in *Eadwine the Scribe at Work* and in numerous other texts, sculptures, paintings and architecture. A great representation

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[10] Losada and Lipscomb, "Myth and Audiovisual Creation," 22.

[11] Seigfreid, "Digital Collections for the Classroom"

[12] Seigfreid, "Digital Collections for the Classroom"

of artwork that prognosticates the marriage of film and myth is the panel *Lamentation* in the

Arena Chapel in Padua done by Giotto di Bondone in ca. 1305. The Lapis Lazuli background of

wet plastered blue is present throughout the entire church, each panel telling a different part of

the story of Jesus.[13] Each tied together through that blue background. This Biblical, visual,

representation of myth is so filmic in nature that it is viewed as almost the frames of a movie. It

combines the filmic editing on the frieze of the Parthenon and the modeling of the murals in

Pompeii and Herculaneum. The knowledge and understanding of light in a two dimensional

frame, or spatial illusionism, was lost with the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and was found again

during the Italian Gothic period, seen in Pietro Lorenzetti's *Birth of the Virgin*[14] as well as in

Lamentation. The understanding of structural integrity with stone that was used in Rome during

the construction of the Pantheon in 27 BC was lost and then emerged once again in Medieval

Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. It is this constant repetition in history, the knowledge

gained and lost in dramatic moments only to be re-learned and improved upon, that foretells the

development of film ages before it culminated into a tangible art form.

It is essential to acknowledge the patterns in history, the tessellations of human nature

that in essence define our choices in the future. "Dionysius of Halicarnassus tells us that History

is 'Philosophy teaching by examples,'"[15] his definition is supported by Frederic Schlegel who

states that "the historian is a prophet with his head turned backwards."[16] Over the course of

history, many philosophers have written that history is cyclical in nature and that is why we teach

it, so that the events of the past can be learned from as they will inevitably recur. As far back as

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[13] Kleiner, "Gardner's Art through," 419.

[14] Kleiner, "Gardner's Art through," 425.

[15] Richardson, "On the Phenomena of," 339.

[16] Richardson, "On the Phenomena of," 339.

the book *Ecclesiastes* written between 450 and 200 BCE, a wisdom book from the Old Testament, it is written that: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun."[17] This idea of originality, panned by Baudrillard for being unattainable, brings to the forefront of this discussion; is there such a thing as a time before myth? Myth is used to explain the unexplainable and help the limits of the human mind comprehend the world around them. It is easier to believe in a form of higher power than it is to come to terms with the fact that we are alone on this rock in space, destined to be responsible for our own choices and our own fates. It is this fact alone that seems to question Barthes supposition that myth is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. Humans evolved and are of nature, though we have strayed far from it since the dawn of our species, and humans created myth to understand the world around them, how can myth not then be a naturally occurring phenomenon. It may be wise to rephrase this idea to: myths serve as a guide to major issues of humanism that reflect the human condition and provide a narrative pathway to reality.

It is wrong to try and differentiate between reality and myth, as myth defined above, relates to a story, whereas the modern myth is a de facto lens through which we perceive all things. Myth to the modern person, is a metaphor that according to Owen Barfield, has gone through a series of evolutions that define our consciousness. He writes in his book *Saving the Appearances* that "the world we accept as real is in fact a system of collective representations."[18] As a species, we entered Barfield's participatory consciousness during the Greco-Roman, the Hebraic and Medieval Europe periods where there was "an awareness which we no longer have,

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[17] Enns, "Ecclesiastes," 1:9.

[18] Barfield, "Saving the Appearances," 20.

of an extra sensory link between percipient and the representations."[19] It was during this time that Iconoclasts feared the power of the image, "because they had predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth they allow to appear."[20] Through both the Iconoclasts and Barfield, it is established that humanity has lost the ability to differentiate between the real and the fictive representation of an invisible being(s). Introducing the concept of idolatry into the modern landscape Barfield writes that "(...) the phenomena *themselves* are idols, when they are imagined as enjoying that independence of human perception which can in fact only pertain to the unrepresented."[21] It is at this point that he sheds light on the power of the scientific revolution where "original participation was expunged from the consciousness of the modern West and idolatry took hold in its place."[22] It places the person who has faith in the position of having to choose between whether or not their God is a symbol of a historic figure/event as it cannot be both. Whereas, Joseph Campbell, a man who's life was spent studying the mythos of the globe to define the Hero's Journey, says:

> Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of men have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social

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[19] Barfield, "Saving the Appearances," 34.

[20] Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," 3.

[21] Barfield, "Saving the Appearances," 62.

[22] Tarnas, "When Symbol Becomes," Becca Tarnas.

forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the

very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.[23]

This understanding that myth permeates the world around us informs Greenaway's rather harsh

critique of cinema. Hollywood has taken and hackneyed the Hero's Journey to the point that

audiences have become increasingly disenchanted by their stories and, therefore, this specific

mythic structure.

Cinema's relationship to myth is profound, its ties to the realm of audio and video so

deeply ingrained within technological advancements that it is almost impossible to conceive a

world in which this seventh art form is not associated with the two. However, in the digital age

of mass production, myth and its dissemination have become significantly easier with mass

consumption and the distribution of digitization.[24] "With the digital turn, mythical narratives not

only have witnessed an explosion of new formats, but they also had to adapt to an audiovisual

storytelling process not always thoughtful about its authentic mythical account."[25] As aforesaid,

language and the narrative are tied to the visual, as there can be no written language without the

use of an image. There is an evolution of the image that is linked with myth, it has adapted from

the Lascaux caves and Egyptian Hieroglyphs to sculpture and painting and finally to

photography and video. Peter Greenaway, a filmmaker, is of the mind that film shouldn't have

been created and that we should have simply stuck to painting and added audio to it.[26] He

ventures to say that film is nothing more than illustrated text, yet, we cannot have the written

word without an image. They are paradoxically tied to each other and so yes, his statement holds

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[23] Mark, "Mythology."Ancient History Encyclopedia.

[24] Losada and Lipscomb, "Myth and Audiovisual Creation," 18.

[25] Sotelo, "Testing the Resilience of," 114.

[26] Zupancic, "Films, the Visual, and," 9.

true that film is just the further visualization of the written word, which to him, is predictable. Greenaway's opinion that the audio visual form of film that has been propagated to an individual's household, and now even to their phone in their pocket, have had a detrimental impact on this art form. He proposes that we return to the public form, that we abolish the use of frame within film and stray into a non-narrative production, which seems impossible as "a signifier might always produce significance. Yet, where there is meaning, there is myth: in myth criticism, we have been trained to watch images in order to uncover the hidden myths, archetypes or symbols underneath the visual." [27]

Myth is so omnipresent in our daily lives that we have lost the ability to see beyond the simulacrum we function under. As Metka writes: "The main hypothesis is that images, together with all other domains of human creativity, from literature to fine arts and even music, carry within them a layer, a substratum that I would call a 'mythical charge.'"[28] This mythical charge has transcended time, cultures and revolutions. It has evolved from the oral to the written to the visual to the media it is today. There is no world before myth or after myth, it is simply the manner through which humanity has always understood the phenomena of the world around us. The Gods have transformed from animals like the falcon Horace and the jackal Set, the human-like the Greek and Roman gods, to human, like Jesus in the Bible. Myths are a universal language, explored and studied by Joseph Campbell, so much so that the Hollywood paradigm is dependent on the Hero's Journey and the three act structure that is deeply ingrained in the global history of storytelling. Myth is presented to us on the daily, we are bombarded with images that tie into the built upon simulacra that the cyclical nature of time has compounded over and over again until symbols immediately trigger an association to a feeling or a story. Perhaps

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[27] Zupancic, "Films, the Visual, and," 9.

[28] Zupancic, "Films, the Visual, and," 4.

Baudrillard's assumption that we have degraded as a society from the ability to distinguish the difference between an idealized image of something and the reality of it is accurate, but that supposes that we have ever truly viewed reality unobstructed. The map of myth is not going to dissipate now that more people are becoming hyper critical of their simulacrum, rather, the continued use of myth in blockbuster films like the Avengers, Star Wars and Harry Potter will inevitably and irreversibly spark another evolution in the expression of myth as the facsimile of a story structure as old as humanity. Myth has been and always will be the drive to uncover and understand the deeper meaning of our existence.

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