

**CULTURAL MYTH CRITICISM:  
A NEW APPROACH TO PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE  
NARRATIVES**

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*The talk will focus on the current context of studies on myth criticism: definition of myth, scientific problems, main trends. It will expose different epistemological, methodological, and heuristic aspects in the study of myths. It will offer the importance of myth studies both in the academic syllabus and in social life.*

1. Game of Thrones (3'18'')
2. American Gods (7'47'')
3. Blood of a Poet (4'30'')
4. Westworld (3')
5. Harry Potter (2'55'')

**1. INTRODUCTION**

There is neither an all-embracing definition of myth that explains the differences between myth and its imaginary correlates nor a well-founded distinction between myth and other misnamed “mythological” perceptions installed in the social imaginary.

One of the problems is the irregular evolution of myth throughout history.

We all agree about myths in Antiquity. The Middle Ages modify to a certain extent the original conception of myth, but the mythological legacy of Antiquity is basically assumed in its main points. This conception of myth suffers relevant modifications during the Modern Age, where myth becomes progressively devoid of its transcendent, cosmogonic, and eschatological

referents. With some exceptions, myth appears fundamentally stripped of any transcendent reference in the Contemporary Age (e.g. Joyce's *Ulysses*, Sartre's *Les Mouches*, Christa Wolf's *Medea*).

And yet, I do not think that the irregular evolution is the unique problem to define myth. We will see that the problem lies on the confusing academic approach to myth. Before moving on, I must give my own definition.

After studying literary texts and artistic representations in the main cultural traditions of our environment (Greek, Roman, Celtic, Norse, Slavic, Biblical, and Muslim), I have inferred this one: «myth is a functional, symbolic and thematic narrative of one or several extraordinary events with a transcendent, sacred and supernatural referent; that lacks, in principle, historical testimony; and that refers to an individual or collective, but always absolute, cosmogony or eschatology».

This is a straightforward, rigid and rational definition. It emphasises the elements that originally gave birth to myth and allowed its flourishing in ancient, medieval and modern times.

I see it in your faces: “Can you show to as an example of myth?”

*In Game of Thrones (5<sup>th</sup> season, 6<sup>th</sup> episode, Jorah Mormont asks Tyrion Lannister if he believes in something beyond material reality. In the face of a negative answer, the knight recounts his passage from disbelief to belief: the sight of a miracle has changed his life.*

### **Video (Game of Thrones)**

The scene condenses the deepest ontological dichotomy: the existence of a transcendent world in sudden communication with the immanent world (that is, a world similar to the one we live in).

Jorah does not allude to a fantasy or auto-suggestion, but to the real presence of an event that contradicts the laws of nature.

What matters here is the presence of two worlds, two physically heterogeneous entities, irreducible to each other and coinciding in the same place and time. There, in this unexpected tension, myth occurs.

It is hard to understand myth when the researcher does not open their mind. Myth requires an openness to the concept of transcendence. Which part of the scene do we play? Mormont's or Lannister's?

## 2. DIFFICULTIES IN THE STUDY OF MYTH TODAY

(Analysis of the shaping factors of contemporary Western society)

This is why Cultural Myth Criticism came into being. This methodology investigates something completely new: a series of configuring factors of our contemporary society that explain difficulties experienced by the academic community to understand myth in all its breadth and depth. These shaping factors are mainly three: the phenomenon of globalisation, the logic of immanence and the doxa of relativism.

I will now develop these factors.

### 2.1. THE PHENOMENON OF GLOBALISATION

Globalisation, a large-scale cultural, social, political, economic, and technological process, involves the communication and dependency among various countries worldwide and the hybridisation of cultures, societies, and markets—that is, the actual suppression of cultural boundaries despite their geographic distances.

*(Originating in Western civilisation and expanding across the world in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, globalisation received its biggest boost with the fall of Communism in Europe and the end of the Cold War.)*

*(In a broad sense, globalisation incorporates local societies and cultures into a single culture or global “village”; it is manifested in the undifferentiated integration of cultural practices, brands, values, icons, characters, customs, and collective worldviews. In a narrow sense, globalisation applies to the distribution and consumption of cultural products on a global scale, including tourist destinations and major events.)*

Myth opposes the global uniformity the same way minority communities oppose intrusion by states.

*(Myth is a product of a town’s tradition, a community, a culture, not a single model of life and society. The endogenous tradition confronts exogenous intervention.)*

In mythology, cultural dialogue is restricted.

*(Far from being an argument against comparative mythology—whose epistemological bases are beyond doubt—this dialogic restriction is a simple observation of the existing psychological barriers between neighboring mythologies.)*

Due to globalization, today myths circulate freely throughout countries so quickly that they become fleeting showcase attractions or carousel troupes: they disappear as fast as they come.

The very own meaning of myth fades, it loses brightness and vigour: in the streets of Madrid, people look at a penitent procession in the Holy Week the same way as they look at a Dragon Parade for the Chinese New Year. In the era of globalisation, myth loses character, idiosyncrasy.

*(Take the technological globalisation. It leads to a series of first-rate changes in the world of myth, both materially and mentally. With the progressive and rapid*

*digitization of communication media, the barriers of worldwide distribution are reduced. The global culture is, above all, audio-visual and popular.)*

## 2.1. THE LOGIC OF IMMANENCE

The second factor which configures our contemporary society is the logic of immanence.

In contemporary Western society, a tacit immanent *Weltanschauung* is predominant. Wide layers of this cultural worldview are based on the unquestioned dogma of immanence. There is only one existing world<sup>1</sup>.

### Video (*American Gods*)

Let us have a look at the *American Gods* series. The society appears to be governed by **the new gods: communication** (portrayed by the character Media), **technology** (Technical Boy), **fame, sex, drugs, gambling, weapons**, all led by the mysterious Mr. World. They appear all dazzling and spectacular in appearance.

Confronted to them, the old gods wear tattered clothes, a metonymy of their increasing failure in the modern world. Their survival depends on their ability to adapt to the new times.

Take the splendid Easter at her namesake celebration—derived from the old Ostara, the Germanic goddess of spring. Unlike the other gods, here we have “an old god new again,” as Media blurts out to her. This ability to adapt comes to be a “religious Darwinism” only suitable for gods capable of accommodating to the environment (season 1, episode 8).

We can see it: the final message is manifold. Old gods’ weaponry is not yet totally exhausted.

The contemporary worldview replicates though the unlimited, fluid, and shapeless horizon of immanence.

This leads us to the third shaping factor of our society.

## 2.2. THE DOXA OF RELATIVISM

Relativism is the ideology which rules the unstable character of everything: it denies a permanent framework that determines the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, and reality. Positively defined, relativism states that our judgments and beliefs are intimately linked to our ways of life, which are adopted agreements in a community (Arregui 2001: 311).

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<sup>1</sup> A philosopher has expressed it in a particularly attractive and disconcerting way: “There are other worlds, but they are in this one.” What is more, if there were they would be as irrelevant as inaccessible.

*(It involves a reaction against objectivism. It supposes that there is not an ahistorical and undeniable matrix determining the nature of reason, knowledge, and truth. Subjectivism paves the way towards scepticism (Bernstein 1983: 8).)*

In its extreme form, relativism questions the existence of something universal and true regardless of interpretations. We can see the link between relativism and democracy, a political system established by consensus.

On the opposite, the world of myth does postulate an unquestionable general mind-set and supports a series of universally valid principles, for example: the limitations of human race, the superiority of gods, and the power of destiny.

There is more to relativism than meets the eye. This doxa leads to commercialism, to systematic disappearance of the concept of a unique and lasting model. For the consumer mentality, everything becomes “ephemeral” (Pope Francis 2014).

*(Consumerism in the new society is based on the multiplication and standardization of products: companies resort to mass reproduction of mythical objects.)*

In the past, the destruction of a statue of a deity endangered its very worship by its followers. Today, a company can daily produce thousands of figurines of that same deity without any implications.

On the contrary, the sacred nature of statues is connected to their uniqueness and their origin: the Palladium —the wooden statue of Athena fallen from heaven— was unique and, therefore, the true image of the goddess, undeniably mythical.

These are, I think, the main philosophical and epistemological difficulties a researcher come across when dealing with myths.

Some difficulties arise from literary criticism. They are related to literary genres.

### 3. PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY

(Correlates<sup>2</sup> of the imaginary)

Ishirō Honda created *Godzilla* in 1954. Awakened by nuclear tests, the beast destroys Tokyo and returns to the sea. Some twenty other films recreate the vicissitudes of this monster. It is difficult not to see this saga as an expression of the fear and ecological anguish of Japan traumatised by nuclear psychosis. When asked about the first production in 1954, Gareth Edwards, director of the latest remake (*Godzilla*, 2014), replied:

Originally, it was a blatant metaphor for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For me, it's the whole point of science fiction and fantasy. On the surface level they're about something very literal like a giant monster, but there's always something, or can be something – a layer underneath that has a metaphorical meaning that you can choose to leave or take.

The metaphoric assessment is good; the mixing up of literary genres (myth, fantasy, and science fiction) is not.

I will now expose differences between myth and three of its imaginary correlates.

#### 3.1. MYTH AND THE UNCANNY

The relationship between myth and the uncanny is a complex one. Contemporary criticism tends to be quite vague when establishing the boundaries that separate both concepts. A correct approach on the fundamental texts is crucial.

Myth and the uncanny are not opposed concepts, but they are diverse.

*(The researcher has to distinguish between the varied forms of transcendence and between the different kinds of timeframe.)*

Broadly speaking, in myth we have a sacred transcendence, whereas in the strange we have a plastic, malleable transcendence; in myth we have an absolute time, whereas in the strange we have a relative time.

By entering the world of this kind of fantasy, the characters distrust their reality. They feel compelled to cross the boundaries of their existence, to penetrate a universe without the obstacles and rules of life (cf. Milner, 1982, p. 139).

*(But going beyond the limits has its risks: the characters experience an overwhelming fear.*

*The uncanny (das Unheimliche) has a typically adjectival dimension, not substantial. When facing it, the subject suffers a terrifying trance, experiencing a cruel, acute and extremely distressing emotion that eliminates the sanctuary of their conscience: the world becomes uncertain.)*

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<sup>2</sup> Correlate: the concept referring to another immediately contiguous concept in the same frame, see C.S. Peirce, «On a New List of Categories», sec. 1-11.

A film by Cocteau represents fantastic situations where the protagonist is prisoner of illusions and panic. *Blood of a Poet* (*Le Sang d'un poète*, 1930) includes a series of scenes closely related to vision of the fantastic uncanny. I will only outline episode 2 (entitled “Do walls have ears?”), the most useful for our reflection.

*(A female statue without arms suddenly comes alive “after an old sleep” and invites the poet to “enter the mirror and wander”. It is a challenge to prove that mirrors can be crossed, something the poet had written with disbelief. The protagonist (the poet) throws himself against the mirror, submerges in the water and flows out in the “hotel of the dramatic absurdities”.)*

### **Video (*Blood of a Poet*)**

After the episodes 3 and 4, we hear the word “End”, and all collapses: everything has occurred in the twinkling of an eye, in a dream.

In his book of confidences, anecdotes and reflections, Cocteau writes:

“Blood of a Poet” is a descent into oneself, a way of using the mechanism of the dream without sleeping.

In this scene the protagonist immerses himself in the mirror’s water, his most intimate being. The oneiric technique allows to enter the vision: the poet demonstrates that it is possible to access the other world.

At the statue’s request, he dives into the water of the mirror, enters the far-off worlds (Mexico, China), the flying childhood, the sexually ambiguous experiences. These worlds are an introspection of the poet confronted with death.

Are we dealing with a mythical katabasis?

- Unlike mythical katabasis, in *Blood of a Poet* the biophysical heterogeneity is only apparent and symbolic.
- There is no *supernatural* and personal transcendence in the film.

Strictly speaking, there is not “another transcendent” world, everything happens in this one.

## **3.2. MYTH AND SCIENCE FICTION**

Myth and science fiction are not good bed companions. On the one hand, science fiction and myth overlap on several substantial aspects: both are stories of extraordinary events (at least, apparently); on the other, only myth presents the clash between the transcendent and immanent worlds.

*(Myth does not circumvent explanation; indeed, the yearning for understanding is part of the backbone of myth, as does science fiction. This genre does not elude explanation: it is determined to understand the intricate mechanisms of the world.)*

Although both seek to explain, justify or deny unsettling situations, myth and science fiction are not interchangeable. Both resort to aetiology (study of the causes): myth searches the transcendent causes, science fiction,

the scientific ones.

There is a discussion about science fiction regarded as the “mythology” of modern times. Truly, traditionally myths have proposed “extreme” situations, and the consequences of such extremes. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, these situations have been portrayed to a great extent by science fiction. This genre would have thus “usurped” (taken over) one of the main tasks attributed to mythical narratives: to answer mankind’s greatest questions<sup>3</sup>.

Let us see a recent example. The series *Westworld* takes place between Westworld, an American West theme park inhabited by androids and visited by wealthy clients looking for limitless, risk-free fun, and Delos Incorporated, which owns and operates the park<sup>4</sup>.

*(The series brilliantly combines extraordinary ideas and special effects. Several plots intersect: the adventures that clients experience with the androids and gynoids, the relentless drive of the “Man in Black”, the business complications of the inventors and the owners of the company... But the researcher cannot limit himself to the analysis of all these plots; their task is rather to unravel the myth.)*

### **Video (*Westworld*)**

*Westworld* offers an authentic modernisation of the myth of Prometheus and the creation of man.

The difference, however, is that the characters in the Greek myths were real people, whereas in the series the mannequins only appear to be real people. The androids are nothing more than machines (in one scene, a client slices open Dolores’s stomach with a knife to reveal the wires and electronics beneath).

Now, some characters —Dolores, Maeve— have developed an artificial intelligence and emotion that lead to an awakening of consciousness through fleeting memories and improvisations. This new development, a central plot in the series, is linked directly to the myth of the creation of man, updated by Mary Shelley in the character Frankenstein (*or the New Prometheus*), who escapes the control of its inexperienced creator.

Broadly speaking, the problems proposed by mythology and science fiction are the same; their solutions are always disparate, dissimilar.

*(We have here, on both an emotional and rational level, the awakening of consciousness or, properly speaking, the unexpected development of an emotional consciousness and rational logic. How this creation has occurred is a matter of conjecture. The viewer, drawn by the credibility of the story, is caught in the web of*

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<sup>3</sup> A paradigmatic example is *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), a film in which the inventor Rotwang makes a robot to replace Hel, his former lover.

<sup>4</sup> J. Nolan and L. Joy, 2016, sequel to the homonymous film by M. Crichton, 1973.

*empathy towards the androids who progressively acquire human nature.)*

*(Westworld's message is disconcerting: not so much because of the progressive humanisation of the androids, the result of errors in their programming and a process unknown to the inventors (common resources in science fiction), but because of the ironic transference of moral categories; the truly normal and natural world is that of the androids, and the misleadingly abnormal and foreign world is that of the humans. The viewer understands it as such, and this acceptance of the message is deeply attributed to the interaction between science fiction and myth.)*

### **3.3. MYTH AND MAGIC**

What about magic?

Magic is to the mythical story what para-science is to fiction. Let me resort to a home-made image. Magic is a credible shortcut to save time or to achieve impossible goals through the usual course of our world.

When the established order in the material world acquires signs of unbearable slowness, myths (and fantasy) make use of magic; it suffices an object (a wand, a ring) to catch a brief glimpse of the past or the future, to convert stones into gold or to dominate the mind of the opponent.

Using white magic (alchemy), characters aspire to know the secrets of the world, to find the Philosopher's Stone<sup>5</sup>.

Using black magic, characters make a pact with the devil to gain power, pleasure or self-affirmation<sup>6</sup>.

Hecate, goddess of the land and of births is also the goddess of magic. Medea brews a potion that she gives to Jason in Hecate's temple so that he can get the Golden Fleece<sup>7</sup>.

Magic is always carried out by means of an *object*: an ointment (prepared by Medea for Jason), a peplum and a diadem (a gift from Medea to Creusa), a philtre (made by Nessus for Heracles).

This is particularly evident in fairy tales, the quintessential magical world: the fairy godmother taps with her wand an object that is immediately transformed. In magic, a supernatural force is present in the world. That is how magic enters the realm of myth.

The *Harry Potter* saga has brought it to the cinema.

*(By mere chance, the young wizard witnesses, in the laboratory of Professor*

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<sup>5</sup> White magic has been personified in history (Paracelsus) and literature (Claude Frollo in *Notre-Dame of Paris*).

<sup>6</sup> Black magic has been personified in history (Theophilus of Adana) and literature (Faust).

<sup>7</sup> About Hecate, see Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Homeric Hymns*; about the Golden Fleece and the potion (*φάρμακον*), see Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*. Traces of this tale feature in literature (The Grimm Brothers' *Snow White*) and in the film *Snow White & The Huntsman* (Rupert Sanders, 2012).

*Dumbledore, the burning and regeneration of the Phoenix. Dumbledore highlights the bird's miserable appearance on its final day:*

*He's been looking dreadful for days. Pity you had to see him on a burning day. Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. They burst into flame when it is time for them to die... and then they are... reborn from the ashes (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, C. Columbus, 2002).*

### **Video (Harry Potter)**

The mythical bird comes to the hero's aid, blinds the basilisk—a chthonic animal with a murderous gaze—and heals the lethal effect of its poison. It does it in extremis: nothing but a shortcut could have saved Harry's life.

This scene shows it clearly: magic exteriorizes mankind's irrepressible desire to transform usual world through extraordinary means.

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The flight we have done over three shaping factors of our contemporary society (globalisation, immanence, relativism), and the short development of three close imaginary correlates of myth (the strange, science fiction, magic) show the necessity of a method for the study of myth.

I have chosen Cultural Myth Criticism to give you a possible response to this need.

## **4. END**