

I. Re-appropriating Cinema

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Mythology Amalgamated. The Transformation of the Mythological and the Re-appropriation of Myths in Contemporary Cinema

Abstract

The paper evaluates the myth-making processes in the history of the movie-making industry, claiming that we are witnessing the coming together of a myth-illogical universe, where Hollywood practices and narrative structures have reached a point of amalgamation with no return. The classical migration of myths has become, in this third age of cinematic mythology, a manifestation of the re-mythologization by appropriation. Analyzing the effects of ideological use of mythology in cinema, the author takes a critical stand against the *mishmash of representations* in films today. Using the concept of *cinematic kakology* the paper develops a reading of the consequences of the absurd amalgamation of myths and mythological figures in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: Mythology, cinema, comic-books, Disney, Greco-Roman heroes, archetypes.

Brief considerations on the “fixed” nature of myth

Defining the myth-making process is a complex endeavor, yet it can be simply described by its three major and distinct manifestations: religious, psychological and cultural. Thus any myth can be analyzed using a given approach, stemming from the functioning of its content. Then sacred, or legend-like dimension, explains the narrative component. The psychological dimension includes both the sacred (or the spiritual) and the personal experiences with mythological consequences. The cultural role of the myths can be his-

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torical or applied to a specific cultural context. Albeit, before choosing any version of myth-making, there is an important distinction to be made. Since all myths are described as homogenous in their profound nature, manifest continuous in throughout the history of mankind, and persistent in culture and art we must ask if this definition is still functional. There is a classical definition, provided by the historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, which provided one of the most common models for this perspective: "A myth never disappears... it only changes its aspect and disguises its operations" (Eliade 1957/ 1967: 27). Eliade's view expresses this dominant understanding of the role played by myths in human culture; a myth is basically an original story, in the sense that it is a narrative about the origins of mankind. In this respect, any myth-making keeps a deep sacred role, even in contexts where the profane dominates the imaginary of the communities. The myth is not only as immutable as the "eternal sacred" in humanity, but it is also true (Eliade 1963: 5-6).

Carl Gustav Jung provided another classical description of the myths as "mythologems", better known as archetypes. An archetype is fundamentally manifested in recurrent myths, which can be traced in any number of manifestations, yet preserving the initial qualities. Even if the archetype is not a myth, there is an archetypal continuity of myths, traced by Jung within the unconscious of humanity, the collective consciousness manifested in symbols (Jung 1956). Following this immutable nature of myth, one of the most important descriptions of this archetypal functioning of myth-making comes from Joseph Campbell, who has condensed the heroic pattern into a single "monomyth". The hero undergoes his adventures then comes back, this is a single repeated plot: Prometheus, Ulysses, Jason, St. George they are all part of a stable archetypal structure (Campbell 1972).

A third major view on mythological functioning was represented by cultural critics like Roland Barthes. Mostly taking on a post-Marxist opinion and describing myths as carriers of ideology, this perspective presents myths as multi-layered structures, yet fixed since they code the representations of power structures in society (Barthes 1957). Once again, this means that the myth has a stable role and manifestation, it is a form of fixating the reality of social life into a narrative of some sorts. In this sense we can develop a mythological interpretation of cultural objects; myth operates within the boundaries of a popular culture founded on a re-representation of the "new" (politics, ideology) with the tools of the "old" (images, narratives, myths).

Cultural migration of myths – the Great Mother from Egypt to Christian lore

One important direction when approaching the interpretation of the imaginary (cinematic or otherwise) is to build upon the paradigmatic nature of the images themselves. The concept of the familiarity of images, borrowed from perceptual psychology, when used to understand the functioning of contemporary imaginary formations shows that there is direct link between cultural memory and visual recognition. We

are attached to those images which are familiar to us, we tend to use these images in order to organize our past, which lead to an *amalgamated imaginary* built by transferred values of various visual structures.

Clearly, mythological transference is not a trait of modernity, nor a novelty of post-modernity. The ancients were keen to conveniently pick up and re-use any myths that suited their religious needs. The appropriation by Rome of the whole Greek mythology (Fantuzzi and Hunter 2004) is the most notorious form of borrowing in the history of European culture, since the Romans moved wholesale not only statues and representation made by the Greeks, but also entire visual structures and mythological narratives into their own culture. Versions of their Greek counterparts permeated the Roman Empire (and, actually, some of the most important art forms of the Greeks are kept due to the Roman replicas).

Yet, in order to understand the longevity of an image and the amalgamation process one of the best examples is that provided by Jung: the Mother myth. Although Jung uses this myth to support his claims that there is a continuous meaning to stories in our collective psyche, one which has a constant content, which basically make it an archetype, the instances in which this myth appears indicate more than just recurrence. Following the historical path of the Mother Goddess, as indicated by two remarkable Jungian analysts, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, takes us to the conclusions that there is a "Myth of the Goddess" which can be traced from the early Upper Palaeolithic to the modern representations of womanhood and maternity (Baring and Cashford 1991/ 1993). For this approach there is a synthesis of mythological figures, not far from what Jung has described in "Psychological aspects of the Mother Archetype" as the transference of images. This is part of specific trait of any myth; its ability to be transferred from one generation to another, thus developing a "collective unconscious".

This "chain of mythological representations" takes us from the various representations of the different Mother Goddesses as virgin and like Persephone and Isis, to the Madonna iconography of the early Christian art. The continuity of borrowed forms of representation and the multiple sources of the image of the Mother of God, be it Cybele, Isis with Horus in her arms, makes it obvious that many qualities of the pre-Christian figures were exported into the early Christian representations (Belting and Jephcott 1994). For example the bear breasted Mother feeding the child that recurred by the late Renaissance is most likely to have been taken from the images of Isis breastfeeding Harpocrates on her lap, while Isis and Horus constituted a reference for the early representations of the Virgin and child. This perspective of cross-cultural migration of images generates a narrow interpretation of iconological transference.

Clearly all religions have imported (and exported) many of the visual structures belonging to other religious forms. Yet even more relevant is the fact that this continuous transfer of images and mythologies, which began in the earliest manifestations of human culture, is not over. As David Morgan extensively discussed the process, us-

ing examples from India, to Indonesia, from Japan to Nigeria, our contemporary religious manifestations are still part of a global visual transmutation (Morgan 2005). Images are circulating at an international scale and, even if most of the times this is a form of de-sacralization, religious imagery and imaginary structures are appropriated and enculturated.

But, in order to understand what is going on with the myth transfer, we must go beyond the simple hybrid myths, those which are recurrent in several cultures. Like the myth of Aphrodite, who is manifested as Ishtar-Astarte, with roots in many of the Eastern goddesses of love to the modern myths about beauty or the myth of the Flood, which crosses from the Sumerian story of Utnapishtim to the Semitic Noah, from the Navajo nation stories of the American Indians to the Chalchiuhtlicue stories in Mexico, these mere recurrent themes. The major problem becomes visible when these “adaptations” of old imaginary formations take “un-orthodox” manifestations in their cultural use and mythological practices. One of the best examples is the Christian story of the last supper and particularly Leonardo da Vinci's fresco. This is one of the most “exported” cultural product in modern visual media. From The Beatles promotion photo shoot to the sci-fi movie *Battlestar Galactica*, from the HBO series *The Sopranos*, to book covers (as is the case with George Carlin), from fashion design (as is with the advertisements for Marithé and François Girbaud) to various comics, they has been a multiplicity of uses of this Christian visual archetype. Contemporary visual artists are not simply recanting an “old” imagine. Contemporary photographers, painters and cinematographers, who are notoriously borrowing mythological narratives and transforming them into new aesthetic discourses, are putting these stories into contexts which are not only forms of hybridization. As is the case with Susan Dorothea White's “The First Supper”, where Jesus and the apostles were substituted by different women of various races, or David LaChapelle's version of the *Last Supper*, represented in a totally mundane context, or the parodical case of Buñuel's *Viridiana*, one of the classical cinematic re-enactments of the subject, we are witnessing more than a simple appropriation.

Mythological representations and cinema

When dealing with myths in cinema the first temptation is to link the discussion to films depicting the Greco-Roman heritage. Sometimes called neo-mythologism (Winkler 2001), the process taking place within the mythological cinema is described the as the visual appeal of the supernatural in a world dominated by rationalism. The new-mythologization of the ancient stories is part of a deep need of humanity for the sacredness of myths.

This is where the interpretative process take on a positive role, the analysis of myths in cinema is done by attributing movies a “good” cultural role. This optimistic view of the role played by myths mixed in film narratives comes from the early interest for classical antiquity in literary studies and thus movies dealing with mythology are per-

ceived within their pedagogical function. In this respect, movies are simply instruments for teaching mythology.

The second perspective, also obvious in other works edited by Winkler, is to look for themes and tropes borrowed from mythology and simply transferred into the film narratives. Here the myth functions as an interpretative tool for cinematic storytelling. Typically, movies like *Star Wars* can be read as an extension of the Argonauts tale, in a film like *What Dreams May Come* the critics identify the story of Orpheus, and characters like Schwarzenegger in *Predator* are representations of Hercules (Frauenfelder 2005: 210-213). Even non-mythological movies can be described as “echoes” or “references” of mythological narratives, as is, for example *O, Brother Where are Thou* where some have identified the lineage of the Odyssey, or *On the Waterfront*, where critics found Christian elements. This view preserves the classical understanding of myths - they are *mythoi*, that is the Greek word for stories, simply narratives about people and places of the past which can be re-told.

This *re-telling* dimension of the “mythological cinema”, as practiced by authors like William Ferrell, looks only at the recurrence of myths in contemporary culture. Movies can be described as modern stories of ancient sources, the premise of this connection being that of the continuity of mythological representations, since myths are extensions of human consciousness, they “travel” from ancient times to the present (Ferrell 7). Following the basic archetypal understanding of the role of myths, such interpretations rather describe “resemblances” between films, literature and myths, and not the deep transference happening. Thus *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is a merely quest for the Grail, or, for that matter, *Jaws* can be seen as a primitive form of Moby Dick. In this sense, myths are adaptations, simple replications of older structures and storytelling paradigms.

For other authors (Singer 2008) film as myth-making is part of the Western civilization’s permeability to ancient the mythological stories, like The Garden of Eden, the variations of the Pygmalion myth, The Beauty and The Beast or Orpheus stories. Cataloging the manifestations of various tropes can become an indicator of the process of mythologization. The interest for myth and mythology in cinema can be linked to the Victorian fascination with classical art and narratives. This interest grew with the development of mass produced images and is now part of our popular culture (Williams 2013). Clearly, the contemporary media function as instruments of mythologization. As Walter Benjamin has eloquently proved it, modernity is a copy oriented world, even the myths which are replicated in the modern representations are simply second-grade narratives, they are lacking their original aura.

Historically, the interest for mythological representations in cinema was described as following two major moments. According to Solomon, the first can be characterized by re-enactments (1897-1918), were the early “mythological movies”, be it biblical (*Ben-Hur* 1916, *The Ten Commandments* 1923) or classical (*Odissea* 1911), are reproducing extremely known mythological scenes and transposing them onto the big screen.

The second moment was between 1952-1981, when Hollywood rediscovered classical mythology and the potential of myth adaptation (Solomon 2001).

I would argue that there is a third movement, beginning after 1981, when the Desmond Davis produced the first remake of the Clash of the Titans, later developing into a modern cinematic trilogy beginning with the 2010 3D saga directed by Louis Leterrier. Now “old myths” are not simply re-enacted for different audiences. My contention is that we are now in a third phase of the mythological representations. In this trend, the copy-like nature of the cinema mythologies brings with it the practice of multi-layered, multiple connections of meaning. In this sense, the myths are not simply de-territorialized, that is transposed into another field of signification only to create new meaning, but they become a part of an *amalgamation process*. As Zipes eloquently described how the modern fairy tales are simply transformed materials, stories produced by *colporteurs*, by peddlers of old narratives (Zipes 2006: 12), cinema is part of this effort of re-mythologization by appropriation. The argument of this interpretation starts with the fact that the roots of the contemporary mythological formations are located in the realm of re-writing, where truncation and abbreviation, dyslexic transformation and aberrant codifications, is more than just a de-sacralization of the world. We no longer use secular narratives with mythological content to replaced the “authentic” sacredness of the primitive ones. There is a “myth-illogical” manifestation of the mythological, where telling stories which are neither sacred, nor profane, manifested in incongruous representations and symbols without fixed meaning - sometimes even based on connections lacking contiguity – is a new form of peddling. The following discussion will analyze how the mythical amalgamation works, and how it provides multitudes of meanings and is continuously permeating our imaginary formation.

“Let each man be a Greek in his own way”

The imagination of modern man started its amalgamation when Goethe claimed a transformation of the German mind as a replica of the Greek mythological framework. Obviously, this has been a recurrent trend; the Greek myths and mythological figures have deep roots in the formation of our modern society. From the revival of the ancient world in the Renaissance, to the German Hellenism, to the advertising world today, we are surrounded by Greco-Roman images and representation. As it has been pointed out, famous brands and commercially successful products like Nike, use this connection between the modern sport activities and objects (like shoes) and old goddess (its winged version of victory). Sometimes the connection is not direct, as for Ajax (the cleaning product and not the hero of the Trojan war), where the link is lost in the meanders of contemporary myth-making. Finally from our rockets and space programs who carry names like Apollo or Mercury, to the use the Olympian torch and the commercial online practices like Amazon, we constantly return to mythology for meanings.

In this respect, we can say that we there is a modern mythological transformation process, a modernizing of the “old” mythological stories, of the classical narratives

about gods or heroes, so that they would serve contemporary (commercial, political, cultural) purposes. These are just old stories disguised into new storytelling practices. There is no changing of the structures of the myth, the “new myths” are not creating new expressions, they are only using the existing material for different purposes. In a sense the modernization of the classical myths equals their transformation into popular mythology. Dumbed down for the use of the average consumer, the grand stories of the past become part of modern myth-making by being reduced to stereotypes, to oversimplified manifestations of the expressivity of their ancient sources.

An important path of myths into the popular culture is taken by their modernization through cartoons and other graphic forms of storytelling. As Janet Wasko showed it, Walt Disney opened the path for the re-appropriation of old narratives (Wasko 2001). As noted by many other authors, almost all the Disney stories (also those which are not directly taken from the Grimm brother's repertory) are at a certain level re-enactments of old myths, most of them referring directly to the Greek mythology. Snow White is nothing but Persephone re-designed (with Demeter as Evil Mother), or Hercules who is a simplified version of the ancient hero. Yet, as it will be developed more below, the Hercules franchise, beginning with the 1996 Disney animation, becomes relevant for the amalgamation process. In order to fit Hercules into the wider audience, the mythological figure is transformed into something completely detached from the original myth. In turn, this transformation is later exported into several other representations, as was the case with *The Legendary Journeys* TV series, where Kevin Sorbo played a Hercules which looked more like a fashion and body building character. Hercules is amalgamated into an appealing, Apollo-like hero, far from the original, brutal, thick bearded and heavy muscled figure represented in the Greek statues and pottery.

The same process takes place in the mythological universe of the “superhero” comics, as it was initially developed by Marvel and DC Comics, and later amplified by the cinematic mythology of the Marvel Studios. Although some authors have tried to prove the Christian roots of the comic book heroes (Dalton 2011), these heroic figures are extracted from the original context of heroes and demigods, that is the Greek and Roman legends. The “superhero” comics, as noted previously by Richard Reynolds, offer us a “modern mythology” which takes elements from several stories of the past and re-designs them for contemporary audiences. At this level, heroes like Spider-Man are nothing more than expressions of the old “regular guy” narratives, where “normal” human beings are called upon to serve humanity as civilizers. Just like the Greek heroes, Peter Parker is transformed by a supernatural intervention only to become himself a supernatural being – thus a demigod. Spider-Man is not different from heroes like Theseus or Perseus, who fight various monsters in order to save their fellow humans from oppression. Even the enemies of the modern day heroes are representations of the old monstrous manifestations. And, just like Superman, Spider-Man and many other comic book heroes are raised by foster parents, another trait shared

with Perseus and other Greek demigods. All these figures have their roots in early mythical representations, and, as indicated by another famous Marvel creation, the X-Men franchise, they are part of a re-creation of the old Pantheon into a new mythological imaginary.

Yet there is more to this re-mythologization since, as it is the case with X-Men, where professor Xavier is more than a paraplegic Zeus, he is an expression of a mixed figure, a by-product of the fascination for the Occult. The artificial and superficial re-enactments in the comic-book universe makes way to an amalgamated mythology, where there is a melange of Nietzschean philosophy with the gods from the Walhalla, where Golems and berserkers are mixed with Egyptian figures like Horus and the Judeo-Christian Messiah operates with the tools of technological witchcraft. This mixing up of narratives creates a *spandex* (Knowles 2007) mythology, one which is elastic and inclusive, opened to a more complex interpretation.

Mythology functions as a tool for ideology

In opposition to the idea that myth-making is a natural manifestation of humanity and that humans are producing myths as a primordial tool for expression (Tylor 1871), the transformation process we discussed leads us to another major function of myths, that of ideological instrument. As indicated by Adorno (together with Horkheimer), in the industrial culture of today myths have become simply ideological tools, instruments to convey a dominant discourse. The culture industry is based on blending aesthetic residues, mixing everything into a fog of their own meaning (Adorno 102). Following this line of argumentation, since any myth has a social and political content, one which we cannot understand independently from its context of production, the mixing of similar mythologies lead to the idea that old myths are destructed in order to create sameness.

The myths function as an “assamblages”, in the tradition put forward by Deleuze and Guattari in their framework of interpretation. The nature of the assemblage is the linking of things which are not naturally linked together, by the force of the mechanic production of meaning in the contemporary reproduction based industries of the visual. Emptying the identity of the myth and then re-organizing it into a new body of meanings is a by-product of the mechanical society. We are machines of assembling, of connecting realities and significations which are otherwise separated (Deleuze and Guattari 1988).

More relevantly, the potpourri of elements mixed into the identity of these new mythological figures, as is becomes explicit in the case of the Disney characters, shows the profound inter-changeability of the mythological order created in cinematic representations. These are multi-layered cultural artifacts, stratified representations which allows them to be used as commodified good, designed for profitable global sales. These are not simply “mini-myths”, versions for the use of kids, they are ready-made myths, for the use of commercial benefits.

The productivity of the ready-made myths created by Disney starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* remains one of the most re-used content in popular culture today. All the “new” Disney princesses are merely replicas of the initial illustration. From the early female characters *Cinderella* (1950) to the *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), from the “middle age” of characters like *Jasmine* (1992) or *Pocahontas* (1995), to the newest additions of “late Disneyzation” such as *Tiana* (2009) and *Rapunzel* (2010), there is a permanent mechanics of the replication, of re-shaping of the same traits and the reproduction of the same qualities. This ensures not only the commodification of the imagines, sold as dolls and children's toys, projected on screens and packaged as food products, it also ensures the ideological control of the imagination of women. The schema of the “primordial” princess, which was *Snow White*, presents the viewers with an ideal of femininity corresponding to a patriarchal scenario (missing mothers, caring fathers, marrying endings) which, according to the argument put forward by Marjorie Worthington (Worthington 2009), drives women for almost 100 years into the “marriage plot” and their submission to the male centered power.

As pointed out by Groys (2008: 166-67), this very appropriation of cultural objects is an expression of the capitalist ideological victory. As expansion of the political power, the ability of cinema to take and plunder any mythological structures and to use them as it sees fit is a form of occupying imaginary territories. This is a conquest of the past, in order to have it serve the purposes of the present. The mental territory of contemporary culture is not only privatized (for the benefit of the grand corporations like Disney), but it is simultaneously a carrier of ideology. This instrumentation is visible in other Disney productions. In *Beauty and the Beast* (1992), a re-telling of a Beaumont tale, the Beast becomes a rich (albeit secluded) nobleman, owning a castle and having many object-servants, who ends up loved by the lower classes. Also the “orphan story” (of almost all the characters) is a representation of the ideological power of modern myth-making. The orphan needs saving, and the saving of the orphan is done by accepting the social order.

Again, the first animated feature film in the history of cinema, which takes on a Grimm Brothers story without any appropriation scruples, is relevant for this discussion. With *Snow White* Disney has set the standards for the cinematic practices of appropriation, for the amalgamated mythological practices of the “factory of dreams”. This so-called adaptation is simply an appropriated story, which, although belonging to the public domain, remains “closed” in the possession of the Disney company. Of course, as soon as the stories used by Disney started to fall into the public domain, others were following suit. In only one year (2012) there have been several takes on the old fairy tale: the ABC TV Series *Once Upon a Time* (starting 2011) *Mirror, Mirror* (2012) *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Snow White: A Deadly Summer* (2012), *Grimm's Snow White* (2012), *Blancanieves* (2012), which lead to the Disney's trade-marking the brand in 2013.

Ever since Snow White, the movie making industry has incorporated classical stories into its long line of misused storytelling. The re-appropriation operates by re-arranging the existing elements, by picking up “abandoned-ware” imaginary, and importing some of the most known visual. By colonizing the imaginary of the past, capitalist appropriation is picking up bits and pieces of myths and stories, then puts them into the assembling machine of the cinema industry, thus creating new organisms, which apparently indicate a unicity and coherence. This amalgamation is not a falsification of stories, nor is it a simulacra of reality. It is the bringing together of elements which do not belong together.

This comes against the hypothesis supported by authors like Jack Zipes, who consider that Walt Disney has “sanitized” the stories and folktales, by domesticating” the very nature of their subversive dynamics (Zipes 2006). There is rather a shameless destruction of myths in order to appropriate them, very close to the concept of Disneyfication proposed by Schickel. Alan Bryman take further this idea and develops the concept of “Disneyzation”. Bryman's suggestion is that we are living in a world dominated by hybrid consumption (p. 57 sq), that is a consumption based society founded on variety rather than on homogenization (as is the case with a close concept, that of McDonaldization). Disney's the cultural forms are bringing together a variety of consumption forms, similar to those of the supermarket. Every institution is influenced by the Disneyzation, the universities and hospitals and even the Vatican start to look like Disney theme parks (Bryman 2004: 98) The merged spaces of Disneyworld correspond to a merged imaginary universe produced by the Disney movies and the Disney mythology. In this sense, the Disney myth-making is building an imaginary shopping mall, where there is everything and anything, without any natural relationship between the products. It is a multiplex of possibilities, a hybrid mythological space which can fulfill any desire, one where there is a general *mishmash of representations*.

From transcultural movie-making to cinematic kakology

The Asian mythology and culture had a long standing influence on Hollywood productions, with movies like *Star Wars* or *The Matrix* as proofs of this impact. Transcultural interchanges between the Asian culture and cinema indicate mutual transference, best illustrated by Kurosawa's the appropriation of European classical authors – his adaptations of Shakespeare (*Ran – King Lear*) or Dostoyevsky (*Hakuchi – The Idiot*) – and the subsequent use of his productions as inspirations for Westerns and other films (*Shicinin no Samurai/ The Seven Samurai* was re-invented into *The Magnificent Seven*).

Yet the recent changes in global cinema, characterized by a new hodgepodge of myths and symbols, show a turn towards a *mishmash of representations*, going beyond the simple interchanges. A relevant example is *Pacific Rim*, the 2012 Guillermo del Toro's film. This production proves the mechanisms of a troubling imaginary cacophony – something which can only be described as *kakology* (kakos, imago and logos), that

is total the amalgamation of imaginary objects. The movie mixes elements taken from other similar productions and mingles myths and narratives. *Pacific Rim* describes robots taken from *Transformers*, with the power source from *Iron Man*, who fighting monsters from *Godzilla*, using heroes acting like those in *Power Rangers* and using narrative tropes from films like *Blade Runner*, *Rocky*, *King Kong* or *Jurassic Park*. Del Toro's film mixes everything in a "rattle tattle" tale, where urban myths are co-joined with aimless representations.

The very name of the fighters/ heroes of the movie describes this pointless mix; they are monstrous and impossible hybrids between a German word (Jäger = hunter) and a Japanese one (Kaiju = monster). Thus the "Kaiju Jaegers", who kill creatures coming from another planet, sent directly through the core of the Earth, are re-enacting popular culture figures in a typical apocalyptic story. While the main characters are piloting huge robots, like those in Japanese anime films and the *Power Rangers* TV series, they establish neural connections similar to those of the characters of *Avatar* and are fighting creatures which look as if they were borrowed from *Jurassic Park* - or simply dinosaurs which grew up around the reactor at Fukushima nuclear plant. Even the functioning principle of the giant robot, which, we are told, is controlled by two people, each coordinating his hemisphere, becomes pointless, since there is another robot, called Crimson Typhoon, which is "driven" by Chinese triplets!

The cinematic kakology operates with multi-layered stereotypes. As seen before, the first level is visual; the robots are re-appropriated images from reality mixed with stereotypical mythology. The main, "rebel" robot, is called Gipsy Danger and looks like the Empire State Building (since it is a representation of the American independent spirit); the Russians drive a semi-primitive robot called Cherno Alpha, which takes pieces from a Soviet tank; while the Australians run a super-robot named Striker Eureka, which functions similarly to a Rover. The nonsensical path taken by the Mexican director started with *Hellboy*, which was a more successful attempt to put together elements from video games, comics, and popular science magazines, all looking like colored plastic toys and future gifts in "happy-meals". If the *Hellboy* series creates an almost logical series of connections between the elements, in *Pacific Rim* there are series of explanations completely disjointed both in time and in space. For example the argument is that the dinosaurs existed because there was a previous attempt to colonize Earth, failed due to... the good weather conditions. There is no clear understanding of the chronology of events – were the dinosaurs destroyed by the Kaijin, or they were their illegitimate children, since they look very much alike?

The second level of melange, the narrative amalgamation is even worse. The film mixes chaotically elements from other cinematic mythologies. This is the case with the planetary Apocalypse brought by the reptilian aliens – allowing the crocodilian monsters to fight mega-robots. Yet the narrative kakology takes us to another level of storytelling ramblings. Travis Beacham, the screenwriter of this movie (relevantly enough,

he has written *Clash of the Titans*) is using half-digested ideas taken out Jules Verne, pseudo-scientific movies and children's films. The amalgamation is simply infantile when the Kaiju and the Jaegers are fist fighting - why should they be boxing, when humans have nuclear weapons? More so, why not use the Power Rangers type of swords all the time? Why walk on the ocean floor when they could swim (since they have atomic engines)? Why an alien culture having a technology so advanced uses mindless creatures to colonize their desired planet? Why a humanity who managed to make such powerful mechanical creatures is on the brink of destruction by the Kaijin? The simple answer is that our modern day mythologies are conglomerates of meaningless representations reproducing endlessly the same imaginary structures.

When Campbell developed the concept of the "hero with a thousand faces" he certainly did not have in mind the mixed-up amalgamation of God and Superheroes in the contemporary cinema. As Grant Morrison explained in a recent book, the superheroes are so important in the contemporary world because they operate in an empty context, they exist in a world in which the gods are gone, replaced by celebrities acting like super-gods (Morrison 2012). And in the pantheon of late modernity, or *video-modernity*, we have a place for all the deities, no matter in which mythological universe these supernatural beings existed. They can come from the Greco-Roman world or the Asian steppes, these pagan gods live alongside with other incompatible ancient divine entities, like those of Christian extraction. All together, in turns, they coexist with the gods of Walhalla and the new deities from our own time.

One of the most relevant Marvel narratives, *The Avengers*, created by Stan Lee, manifests the same excess of super-gods and super-heroes per square inch (in terms of comic book publishing). *The Avengers* are a mixture of characters putting together Iron Man, Ant-Man, Wasp, Thor and The Hulk, in a series of adventures where the Nordic god Thor is fighting alongside Captain America, joined by Hercules, Rogue and later even Wonder Man. This ensemble of amalgamated heroes and gods was brought to screen by director Joss Whedon (*Marvel's The Avengers* 2012). Whedon puts together all the superheroes and creates a jumble of action, conflicts, twists and confrontations between various heroes, who were dominating lately the popular cinema. The film becomes a visual excess of mythologizing – by the use of excessive special effects, and an added excess of fiction and superficiality. However, the movie reached staggering sales of 1.5 billion dollars internationally, with an initial budget of 220 million. This proves not only how profitable super heroes are, but also how popular the amalgamation of images and narratives has become. The story takes the viewer from the Asgard of the Eddas to the modern day New York, where a Chitauri alien invasion is expected. In this chaotic melange, Iron Man bickers with Captain America, then fights with Thor fight with the green hero Hulk emerging as victorious. This is the typical dyslexic mythological make-up, nothing is in place, nothing matches, nothing fits together, while everything mixes indiscriminately.

“Spoof-o-logy”, or the parodic re-appropriation of myths

Boris Groys used the term *appropriation art* to describe a preferred instrument of the postmodern thinking and creativity. Appropriation, explicit from the early modern art of Andy Warhol, to the latest productions in contemporary film industry (Groys 2008: 8-9), is practiced as a transformative intervention on existing forms. Creating almost paradoxical manifestations by changing the use of objects is a characteristic of the contemporary art. Here the creation of any new image turns, in fact, into a form of radical criticism towards the initial object (as was the case with Duchamp's work) and an expression of the discontent towards the “original” or, for that matter, any originality.

In cinema it was Mel Brooks, the “grandfather” of cinematic parody, who illustrated best how the mechanism of ironic appropriation works; by the derisive mutation of the initial work, parody, today a totally separated cinema genre, thrives within the boundaries of intertextuality. The film parody is nothing more than a manifestation of the *pastiche*, as Jameson has put it (1992), which is in turn part of the postmodern mind-frame. The classical mutation of meanings practiced by Brooks through the use of mockery, has put the foundations of the “spoof”. His movies, starting with *Blazing Saddles* (1974), a parodical re-appropriation of the westerns, to *Space Balls* (1987) where various materials from *Star Wars* and other sci-fi movies is incorporated, to *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993), with the re-digesting of the quest and adventure genre, follow the logic of re-enactment. Since the spoof does not exist without the original, it is constantly forced to make references to the initial forms.

The tradition of Brooks, which continues today with the movies of Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer, has become an incongruous mix of half-digested references, in a mix-up of amalgamated clichés. Friedberg and Seltzer, in a series of movies like *Epic Movie* (2007), *Meet the Spartans* (2008), and more recently *The Starving Games* (2013), show how instead of the parodic treatment of old materials, the amalgamation becomes a source of degraded intertextuality. Actually the intertextuality becomes sexual-textuality, since most of the times the amusement is not only breaking the limits of logic, but also the common sense. In the amalgamated universe of second-hand mythology there are no more distinctions, no more codes (sexual or social), and the sheer destruction and re-construction of meaningless situations is the only purpose. In these movies Spiderman is witnessing a strip tease performed by Mystique (from X-Men), in a the melange of tropes and narratives which allow the same character to move from sequences from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, to episodes in which he is transferred from *Borat* to *Superman*, from Jack “Swallow” of the Caribbean, to the *Da Vinci Code* and even *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Of course, everything is spiced up with gratuitous sexual innuendos and scatological humor.

A more primitive version of this re-appropriation can be found in one of the most vulgar films of this kind: *Your Highness* (2011). Written, acted by Danny McBride, this production indicates the transmutation of mythology in contemporary visual cul-

ture. The comedy of McBride not only reaches heights of sexual innuendo, disgusting and vulgar references to scatology, but it also practices the most debased form of mythological amalgamation. *Your Highness*, a film starting as Brooks-esque parody of *The Princess Bride*, mixed with the typical “comedy of fools”, a sort of *Dumb and Dumber* in medieval mise-en-scene, becomes a total mishmash of nonsensical references. For example in a scene where the hero, Thadeous, kills the mythical Minotaur, he is unable to cut a horn as a souvenir, thus he decides to mutilate the monster's penis and to wear it as a necklace. Or, when he wants to convince the wise wizard to help with his initiation journey, he provides the man with a thorough masturbation under the magic robe! Or, when he discovers that his squire, Fabious, is a traitor, he shows everybody that the man has a vagina, so this becomes another good opportunity for nudity and, more importantly, exposing the viewers, for several minutes, and from several angles, this absurd amalgamation of identities. The climax of the movie, a pseudo-irony of the Highlander films, takes us to the ill-inspired moment of “The Fuckening” - not to mention the ending of the movie with a final masturbation, void of any sense.

Finally the best example of how appropriation work properly is the *Shrek* franchise - *Shrek* (2001), *Shrek 2* (2004), *Shrek the Third* (2007) and *Shrek Forever After* (2011), with the prequel *Puss in Boots* and some extras (mostly holiday specials) *Shrek the Halls* and *Scared Shrekless* together with several short films (*Shrek in the Swamp*; *Thriller Night*; *Donkey's Caroling* and others). This is one of the most prolific production in recent cinema, and is extremely relevant for the discussion about the functioning of myths in contemporary visual culture. Mixing characters taken from Perrault, like Puss in Boots, with Rumpelstiltskin, an antagonist borrowed from the Brothers Grim, with witches and humans as equally evil participants, *Shrek* puts a spin on the traditional fairy tales, making amalgamation its central axis. As noted before, Shrek is the typical postmodern story, where the melange of fairy tales is based on a reversal of identities – an *Orcus* is a god of the underworld, who is usually killed by the hero, not the other way around.

Without trying to expand on this extremely challenging topic, this narrative is an very relevant case for the “ethology of crossbreeding” in contemporary cinema making. The “métissage” practiced by the creators of *Shrek* stems from the mythological hybridization of our visual culture. Elements from several classical narratives are appropriated for the benefit of a new production, in an indistinctive mixture of composing parts. Shrek, who is clearly an anti-hero, since he lives as a marginal and has no friends, is accompanied by a mule, Donkey. His universe is populated by numerous fairy tale characters, which most of the times have nothing to do one with another. Such is the coexistence of Pinocchio and the Big Bad Wolf, of Farquaad, the invented antagonist, with Gingy the Gingerbread Man, who later fights in gladiator-like battles. Everything is a melange in *Shrek* and the politics of métissage is explicit from the first installment – the first *Shrek* ends with the ogres marrying and the fire blowing

Dragon, who is actually and Dragoness, also ends up marrying the Donkey. In the second *Shrek*, she makes half donkey babies, dronkeys with flying abilities. Nothing is immutable in the logic of amalgamation. This is the case with Fiona, the Ossian ogre who is mixed with elements from Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty, has traits from Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel, yet she coexists as friends with all of them, including the transvestite Doris, the Ugly Stepsister. This mingling of identities is even more explicit in *Shrek the Third*, when, by the magical intervention of a absent minded Merlin, Puss in Boots and Donkey are inter-changed.

No identity is stable in this new mythology; Prince Charming and his mother, the Fairy Godmother, are ruthless social climbers; King Arthur is simply Artie, a Pendragon who does not want to be a hero; Rumpelstiltskin becomes an expression of an extortionist and of a dictator, sharing similarities with Lord Farquaad. Not only that Prince Charming is a reversed figure, since the "Prince" was a Disney creation from the start, but in the postmodern culture logic of the bricolage, the mingling is always inter-textual. Puss in Boots, who also appeared in one of the earliest Disney production, is later transformed in the third movie, as the fat Puss, the duelist who has become obese and lazy (behaving like a decrepit Marlon Brando). And since *Shrek* take place in Far Faraway, a parodical reference to Hollywood, almost all the myths and characters of the contemporary cinema productions are re-appropriated, in a total transformation of identities, where the boundaries of fiction are moving beyond metafiction, into a total cross-referencing. *Shrek* brings together elements from almost all the Disney productions, it gives way to parodic re-appropriations of movies like *The Princess Bride* and *Robin Hood*, it criticizes Hollywood practices and narrative structures, becoming the ultimate expression of the contemporary *myth-illogical* practices.

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