

MYTHS AS COMMON CULTURAL REFERENCES

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to look at myths from the perspective of understanding the world through common cultural references. According to Wittgenstein, we need a common context, so that we feel we belong to the same culture. Fairy-tales and myths we are taught are ways to be part of the respective culture. We need to be familiar with its products before contributing ourselves to it. Fairy-tales a certain generation of children grows with forms such a common cultural background, as well as the way we see time, such as linear or circular, and ways we interpret the mythology of time travel. The advantages and shortcomings of understanding myths from this perspective will be explored.

Keywords: stories, comparativists, time, national myth, founding myth.

1. Motivation

What was the original purpose of myth and what is its purpose today? Its original purpose was to explain the way the world works and to find answers to common human existential questions. In the beginning, myths were functioning as philosophical and scientific explanations for the way the world worked. Man has always had the need for explaining the way the universe was created, the way the world worked the way it did, the way certain countries, continents and cities were created and why they were named the way they were. Myths fulfilled the role of explaining before the development of language, art and writing, ever since cave paintings. The reasons why we hold certain values about what is good and what is bad, meaning why we hold certain values, could also be explained by myths. Myths function as models of our own society. We live in a society influenced by myths, which legitimize a certain way of life and preferences over one state of affairs over another state of affairs. We take heroes' behaviour in myths as a model for our own life: for example, in classical Greek mythology, we see heroic behaviour, as well as examples of punishment of various characters for evil deeds. Such elements are universal, however, in world mythologies. We could regard myths as having the purpose of trying to explain various mysteries, not solving them completely, but at least trying to offer a version of a story about certain aspects. For instance, in the myth of the creation of the world, we find various versions. In Norse mythology, the world of the humans begins after the existence of another world, where time was created, then this world was destroyed, and out of it emerged another one. Myths offer not necessarily the truth, but versions about existential dilemmas. There was not a question of literal truth of a story in certain cases, but instead one about the interpretation of its meaning, similarly to a fable. For example, in the story of classical Greek and Roman mythology about the god of fire bringing the fire on earth, we could find the interpretation of an invention shared by someone with the rest of humanity. Inventors would always have an aura of a special person to whom humanity is grateful. Nowadays we have explained various natural phenomena and existential questions through philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis and science. Yet, myths are still used in order to provide common cultural references, in the case of founding myths. The name of the city Athena is after a goddess from classical mythology which we all know as the goddess of wisdom and hunting. Wisdom is a commonly appreciated value across cultures. Myths help us build a common

cultural context, according to Wittgenstein. Part of myths building a common cultural background are fairy-tales with which certain generations of children grow, as well as myths we frequently encounter in cultural productions, such as time travel, interpreting time as circular or linear, etc. We could claim that the role of myths is still an issue of actual discussion, since we find them in the everyday life reality, under the form of names of cities and places as well as introduced into films and novels. Our tendency to still expect from myths the function of explaining something is well captured by Sam Gill when he claims that the role of myths remains, in our mind, that of giving the first accounts of the world, as well as we could at early stages of world development:

We invariably demand that cultures have mythology and that it be connected with an explanation of origination. We usually date myth as arising in antiquity and consider it as though it has somehow survived without change. Myth is expected to function as charter, as primitive explanation, as descriptive anatomy of chronological development particularly at the creation and embryonic stages. (Gill 1998: 176)

The question is what role do myths play in such contexts and what effect they have on our response to various touristical brochures, feelings of national belonging, or to enjoying reading a certain bestseller and box office film.

How do myths still influence us today is a question this paper attempts to answer, from famous phrases with cultural references, names of the week, months, etc. to founding and national myths, meant to instill patriotic values.

2. Common Cultural References

We need shared myths, and shared stories to function socially, as that is the way we learn meaning and values. Mythologies, whether religious or not, fairy-tales, stories, national history, represent the “common narrative context”, according to Wittgenstein, Weaver and Macintyre (in Ganea 2017). Communication and understanding is impossible when there is no common narrative context, and everything we do in our lives has meaning only when we share the same tradition.

2.1. The Influence of Myths in Everyday Life

Our contact with mythological character comes easily from the phrases we hear around us on a daily basis. If we wish to understand these common expressions, we need to have a basic knowledge of mythology.

We notice how our common, everyday language contains references to gods from mythology, such as the names of the days of the week, the names of the months and the names of the planets, which are all taken from ancient mythology. Waters also remind of ancient mythology heroes: for instance, Hellespont, the place where Helle fell, or the Icarian Sea, the place where the famed Icarus fell. Athena gives her name to the city of Athens; in this case, we could say that we deal with a founding myth. Phrases such as Achilles heel refers to someone’s vulnerable point, as we all know Achilles could only be injured in his heel, from mythological stories.

We could claim that through these expressions, myths provide common cultural references, a common background that we share nowadays, as Wittgenstein states. Part of this tradition of sharing a common cultural background are fairy-tales. Different generations of children grow with different fairy-tales. For instance, the Harry Potter generation has become a world-wide phenomenon. References to the characters and stories in these series are a feature of common context for the generation of children who grew up with the popular

novels as they were being published. We notice on social networks various jokes and statuses making reference to Harry Potter novels and films. The common background is similar to those of children in Romania soon after Communism who grew up with poet Ana Blandiana's poems, Petre Ispirescu's fairy-tales, Brother Grimms' fairy tales and Ion Creanga's stories and fairy-tales gathered from Romanian folklore. Nowadays, Romanian children grow up not only with Romanian authors, as children's literature is also including foreign fairy-tales among the classics.

Other influences of myths include those used to create patriotic feeling among members of the same nation. Stories with historical heroes defending the country during invasions are part of this mythology. As part of common references, there are myths related to the European Union which go back to references of Europa and the bull myth from classical mythology:

You could of course be forgiven for the myth analogy, after all, our veryname is rooted in mythology – Europa being a beautiful maiden carried off by the God Zeus in the guise of a bull. But today's Europe, beautiful though she may be, is no longer that kind of girl. (Ferrero-Waldner 2007: 1)

The above quotation refers to a divagation from traditional expectations. Indeed, regarding the bull myth, it applies to the EU as follows:

There are at least three different ways of representing this myth in terms of global Europa – the 'rape of Europa', the 'seduction of Europa' and the 'transition of Europa' – all of which express the disjuncture of pre- and post-war European history. (Manners 2010: 68)

Such comparisons can become part of a very suggestive and expressive discourse which everyone will understand due to the known common cultural references. The expressivity of these comparisons help the discourse become very persuasive and rich in figurative language, just like a literary work.

2.2. Comparativist and particularist approach

There are various approaches to myths, some claiming that there are universal features to mythologies of the world and some claiming that there are particular ones. The truth lies, of course, in-between these approaches. Yet, we can find common themes and purposes to myths throughout time and cultures.

Myths' fundamental purposes are to explain the world, or at least to provide a legitimation for a certain world order. We could also speak about myths in politics. Authors such as Bell (2003) draw attention to concepts such as national memory, consisting of those narratives similar to myths regarding the common historical past of a nation:

'national memory', the totalizing mnemonic that forms the basis of the nationalist narrative: the alleged unified, coherent memory shared amongst all of the people concerning their national past. (Bell 2003: 74)

We could refer to the myth of the Jews as the chosen people, to the myths of the progress of history towards communisms of Marxist theories, to the inability to avoid globalization in the present age. Such myths create groups of 'believers', and give them unity, identity, and a sense of purpose. They are myths since they are believed to solve a certain problem, when in

reality the problem is complex and its resolution does not stay in these myths. Such myths cannot be proved true or false, as they extend beyond science.

Regarding the science of mythology, Campbell states that myths belonging to various cultures can sometimes come into contact and influence one another:

For, as a broad view of the field [of mythology] immediately shows, in every well-established culture realm to which a new system of thought and civilization comes, it is received creatively, not inertly. A sensitive, complex process of selection, adaptation, and development brings the new forms into contact with their approximate analogues or homologues in the native inheritance, and in certain instances - notably in Egypt, Crete, the Indus valley, and a little later, the Far East - prodigious forces of indigenous productivity are released in native *style*, but on the level of the new *stage*. In other words, although its culture stage at any given period may be shown to have been derived, as an effect of alien influences, the particular style of each of the great domains can no less surely be shown to be indigenous. And so it is that a scholar largely concerned with native forms will tend to argue for local, stylistic originality, whereas one attentive rather to the broadly flung evidence of diffused techniques, artifacts, and mythological motifs will be inclined to lime out a single culture history of mankind, characterized by well-defined general stages, though rendered by way of no less well-defined local styles. (Campbell 1991: 48)

We could find common motifs and aspects in various cultures related to myths, such as the concept of time. For the ancient Egyptians, time was not linear, but circular. The present was regarded as a recurring pattern. We see nowadays history and time as progressive, as linear, while the Egyptians only saw as linear the early periods in history, believing that present happenings simply repeated myths.

Authors such as Vladimir Propp focus on a common structure of myths, as he does for the plot structure of fairy-tales in the Russian culture.

Also included under the category of universal myths are psychological myths such as the Oedipus complex and Jungian archetypes. These are believed to be found in human psychology regardless of cultural background. These myths focus on the universal psychological evolution of any humans, at any time in history, from any part of the Earth.

Time travel, the flood myth, and the axis mundi, are only a few examples of commonly found myths in several cultures. What is more, they can be found in the novels and films that are still promoted by the media nowadays, in order to ensure success to the audience (Bradley 2011).

Another common aspect of myths is that various cultures rest on the claim that their customs and traditions have been established by their gods and by other heroes which are part of their mythology.

3. Conclusions

Due to their universality, myths can show anticipations of technological and scientific development. Since myths have attempted to answer existential dilemmas and to offer explanations for the way the world works, they have been the earliest forms of desires to improve the way this world works. We could say that we can find examples of organ transplants, cloning, teleportation, and anticipation of flying machines in the *Mahabharata*. This does not necessarily mean that back in ancient times there had been the same technological development as today. People have imagined stories and have wished to improve the world through inventions, which have only been available with the strong

development of technology through the means of science. Yet, it has all started with myth. Afterwards, humankind has progressed from dreaming and creating stories to putting them into practice. However, universal patterns in myths can still be included as proving something about a universal feature or features in the psychology of humankind. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung drew heavily in the development of their psychoanalytical theories on myths. We could claim that myths are still sources of wisdom and of establishing a common set of values, traditions, customs which can instill patriotic feelings to those belonging to the same nation.

We can be manipulated by novels and films which become bestseller and box-office hits if they rely on universal myths. We enjoy them since we are familiar with their structure from our early childhood years when we listened to fairy-tales. Fairy-tales and other myths are sometimes controlled by the political context of the time. Certain fairy-tales can be regarded as politically correct to legitimize a certain social order and values society holds dear and needs in order to function properly. The tales ending with a happy marriage after lots of obstacles could instill certain values such as fighting to get the attention of the loved person. The fight between good and evil with the triumph of the good also has to do with values. Such fairy-tales can educate persons who belong to the same social group to accept to behave according to a set of rules and values and become members of society that are active and respect certain rules.

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