

Myths of Femininity in *American Gods*

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Abstract

This article explores the way in which the TV show *American Gods* represents the myths of femininity and how they fit in the digital format, together with the implications of such a dynamic. It is proposed that the TV show recreates the feminine myth in a more successful way—in comparison with the homonymous book on which it is based—thanks to the advantage provided by the discussion about women in the hypermodern era through an equally hypermodern product, the television series. Thus, we find that feminine myths are typologically a contemporary reformulation of the ancient cyclic and lunar myths and that this representation is a statement of the importance of the participation of women in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Myth criticism, female agency, *American Gods*, Gaiman, hypermodernity, cyclic myths.

1. The Relevance of *American Gods*: Scope and Argument

Neil Gaiman is a British author that started his career as a writer of comics and then became one of the most respected authors of fantasy novels. Gaiman's novels are stories about stories and they explore the way in which those stories can exist in the mind of a person and take a life of their own. Although Gaiman's novels are set in the contemporary world, he weaves ancient myths and legends into them. Hence, we have stories within stories offering new interpretations in new plots. *American Gods*, published in 2001, is one of those fantasy novels. Gaiman sets the story in contemporary United States. The author puts his protagonist, Shadow Moon, into the realm of stories that live and breathe: the realm of the gods. These gods do not simply exist in people's minds. They are personified, physical characters and readers know about their divinity through their own words, since they confess to Shadow that they are gods. (This will also happen in the TV show.) We also know they are gods based on their cultural background. For example, whoever is familiar with Norse mythology will soon know that the owner of the crows Huginn and Muninn is the god Odin.

American Gods won the Locus, Bram Stoker, Nebula, World Fantasy, SFX Magazine and Hugo awards, which are the most prestigious science fiction and fantasy awards in the world. In April 2017, the American premium cable and satellite television network Starz aired the first season of an adaptation of the novel with Bryan Fuller (*Hannibal*, *Pushing Daisies*) and Michael Green (*Everwood*, *Heroes*) as showrunners and Gaiman himself as an executive producer. There are many reasons to study *American Gods* from a comparative perspective since the story has been adapted to different media. The story

is a transmedia phenomenon because besides the book and the series there are other creations (comic books, by example) based on this particular literary work. Nevertheless, we will focus on the TV show because we believe this format is currently the most important for the dissemination of myths. Michael Green and Bryan Fuller's *American Gods* adaptation was very well received by both audience and critics (Rotten Tomatoes) and is very attractive audiovisually.

The study of this show is also important from the perspective of cultural myth criticism because there are characters from different mythologies that interact. *American Gods* is a cultural product that, thanks to its enormous success, has taken its interpretation of myths to various parts of the world, thus offering a perspective that must be analyzed from the point of view of myth criticism. Both the series and the novel approach one of the most compelling challenges of our time: the loss of identity and collective memory caused by the migration of an immense number of people, who, for different reasons, are forced to leave their places of origin and, with this, their gods. Both the novel and the series show various people under the threat of forgetting the faith and traditions of various populations in the hypercapitalist world system. In our particular case, we review the way in which migration created a new and influential nation, the United States of America. Myth criticism, as proposed by Losada (2015, 11-14), distinguishes three factors that must be considered to make an appropriate analysis of the myths in their current cultural manifestations: globalization, immanence and consumption. It is curious that the series is the result and at the same time a critique of these characteristic factors of our time. The show *American Gods*, by its characteristics, is an ideal object of study to review these processes. We consider these elements here in relation to the characters.

The present essay will focus on analyzing the way in which the story presents female myths and how they are adapted to the digital audiovisual format, including the implications of such a dynamic. We propose that the series recreates the female myth in a more successful way than the book, due to the adaptive advantage offered by the discussion agenda around the woman who is verified on the hypermodern stage in which we live through an equally hypermodern media (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2007). The feminine myths in the series coincide in being typologically a reformulation of ancestral cyclic and lunar myths (as the latter are explained by Durand, 1996).

American Gods is a story that operates on two diegetic levels, which makes it more interesting, because it reveals at the same time—for Shadow, its protagonist, on the one hand, and for the viewer or reader, on the other—the existence of an alternative world, a world inhabited by gods. The story depicts the conflict over the confrontation between the “old” gods, who refuse to disappear because they have been forgotten or supplanted, and the “new” gods, who want to “reprogram” reality and control it by eliminating all competition. Significantly, the new gods’ names are Media, Technical Boy and Mr. World, allegorical representations of media, technology and globalization, respectively. Among the ancient gods Odin, from Norse mythology, Vulcan, from Latin mythology, and Anubis, from Egyptian mythology appear. The country is also inhabited by divinities or legendary beings from other latitudes: Africans like Anansi, Irish like Mad Sweeney, Arabs like The Jinn or Slavs like Czernobog. Thus, the show represents a fundamental part of migrant demography through a very peculiar pantheon. These gods, it must be stressed, only survive thanks to the fervor of human beings and can die if they have been forgotten or simply if they are weaker than others, hence the individual drama of each deity.¹

The first season aired from April to June 2017 on the premium channel Starz. The show consists of eight one-hour episodes now available worldwide on Amazon Prime

Video (without considering the non-legal methods to see it online). The second season premiered in March 2019 and a third season was recently confirmed (Hibberd), so it is going to be present for at least one more year, although his main creator, Neil Gaiman, is also thinking of a fourth season (Pena, 2019). This means a minimum of a five-year period of influence and distribution of myth and its “lessons” (Durand, 1996, 347).

The eight episodes of the first season can be considered a *road series* (a kind of generic evolution of the typically American *road movie*) set in symbolic or emblematic spaces of the United States. Shadow Moon (Ricky Whittle) has been released from prison after serving a three-year sentence for an attempted robbery and meets Mr. Wednesday (Odin, played by Ian McShane), who offers him a job. His wife, Laura Moon (Emily Browning), has died along with Robbie, his best friend, so he accepts the job, because he shares no ties with her hometown, Eagle Point.² With this, Shadow begins his initiatory path, as he will go through some phases of the hero’s path (Campbell), among which the initial test stands out: Shadow Moon fights the leprechaun Mad Sweeney and drinks mead, honey wine, “Drink of heroes, drink of the gods” (“The Bone Orchard”). Wednesday, or Grimnir, as they will call him,³ will recruit the old gods who are on his side to undertake a struggle to regain the strength that the new deities have taken from them. Although this is a story in which male characters predominate, the role of women is essential if we insert it in a reading horizon that problematizes modalities of gender visibility and agency nowadays.

2. Creative Encounters and Myth Adaptation

When Neil Gaiman wrote *American Gods* almost twenty years ago, he probably did not imagine that his book would be brought to the screen by one of the most acclaimed showrunners in history, Bryan Fuller. He did not imagine either that some of his characters, in the adaptation, would undergo some transformations that would increase their significance in the plot and, above all, their “*prégnance symbolique*” (as defined by Durand, 1996, 241), for example, the character of Laura Moon, that in the TV show is a protagonist. These modifications in the plot due to the creative imagination of the two artists and the participation of their enormous production team—as hypermodern production requires (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 36-39)—are also orientated to denounce the risks of consumerism and globalization in Western culture. Hertz Wendel de Camargo, following Muniz Sodré, reminds us that cinema and television are Narcissus machines, programmed to educate using sound and images in movement to represent reality and to function as training for living in society.⁴ The Brazilian researcher, in addition to highlighting this form of provision for social behavior roles, explores the relationships between consumption and the imaginary, also highlighting the importance of symbolic exchange that allows the circulation of images in serial narratives. These models, then, in the products at hand, show how the feminine role and other social challenges for equitable democratic coexistence are reproduced in the media.

Among Gaiman’s most famous works are *The Sandman*, which began in 1989 for the prestigious DC Comics, in which he already used a mixture of mythologies; *Coraline* (2002), a children’s novella that was adapted for a video game; *Stardust*, illustrated by the artist Charles Vess, specialized in the representation of myths, and adapted to the big screen in 2007. It is also necessary to say that Gaiman received, in addition to the already mentioned recognitions, a nomination for the Mythopoetic Awards for *American Gods* (2001).⁵

Bryan Fuller, meanwhile, is an American writer and television producer whose works include *Dead Like Me*, for the Showtime network, which explores life after death and has

a film adaptation to video; *Wonderfalls*, broadcasted on Fox, which had only thirteen episodes; *Pushing Daisies*, famous for its distinctive visual style and extravagant characters, developed around the faculty of its protagonist to revive the dead. Finally, there is *Hannibal*, based on the famous books by Thomas Harris, a psychological horror thriller that had three seasons and was critically acclaimed and praised for his visual style, and which became Fuller's most awarded series so far. It is remarkable that Fuller has abandoned many of these projects due to creative differences, but definitely, in *American Gods*, he applies what he learned from his past projects.

The work of the two artists is characterized by intermediality, their preference for the transitions with adaptations from a format to a different one. In *American Gods*, both the mastery of the fantastic-mythological genre of Gaiman and the symbolic-visual genius of Fuller are combined to produce one of the most interesting representations of the myths of femininity of contemporary series. This is the result—very important for myth criticism studies, in their search of various myths—of the coincidence, of the meeting of two true *mythmakers* and not only of people interested in sales. We follow the definition of mythopoetic literature offered by The Mythopoetic Society (2018), as one that:

[...] creates a new and transformative mythology or incorporates and transforms existing mythological material. Transformation is the key—mere static reference to mythological elements, invented or pre-existing, is not enough. The mythological elements must be of sufficient importance in the work to influence the spiritual, moral, and/or creative lives of the characters, and must reflect and support the author's underlying themes. This type of work, at its best, should also inspire the reader to examine the importance of mythology in his or her own spiritual, moral, and creative development.

This definition, we believe, can be somehow applied also to the mythopoetic creators we are examining here.

In the present work, we analyze how a couple of stories of femininity are presented and how some of the series adaptations increase the mythical potential of the characters and themes of the book in their moral aspect, demonstrating that myth adapts well, in certain cases like this, to the conditions of commercialization of the industry and transcends its production premise to be channeled into works of art such as *American Gods*. We are only going to focus on the representations of the Zoryas (or Auroras) of the Slavic mythology, and of Ostara, of the Germanic mythology, although in another context, the same perspective might be applied to Bilquis (a representation of the Queen of Sheeba), Media (a new goddess) or Laura Moon (who refuses to die and is a kind of zombie). Furthermore, the implications of reconfiguration will be considered, since female characters bring up myths that function as an allegory of the cyclical, a return to the sacred that brings hope in this hypermodern era. They are nevertheless not freed completely from patriarchal determination, since, as Quezada Camberos and Leandro Jiménez affirm, every “coercive event intuitively empowers ‘being a woman’ in our day, that is, taking into account that a woman should not grant the dominator that status, and should be protected” (212, our translation). The authors then list the obstacles on the way to such a situation: “The logic of domination is a principle imposed by tradition, by culture, by the historical accommodation of social roles according to the sexes” (215, our translation). Those roles could help, when properly represented in smart cultural products, to lead to gender equity in the near future.

Each of the goddesses, the Zoryas and Ostara, represent a different kind of incarnation in the United States. Each symbolizes the state of crisis of the contemporary hypercapitalist system that, as stated, has forced millions of human beings to forget their gods and lose their identity. We should remember that the “mythic narratives are the sacred stories that are central to cultural identity because, for the cultures to which they belong, these religious myths convey some significant truth about the relationship between human beings and the source of being” (Leeming, “Introduction”). These mythical narratives of femininity carry out the important role of characterization of female identity, a central theme in *American Gods* that we explore here.

3. Myth in Hypermodernity: From Cinema to Serial Narratives

Nowadays, myth moves around the world thanks to digital transmission, which takes it from one place to another almost immediately. Technological globalization, in this sense, allows the stories of different regions of the planet to coincide, to coexist and intersect. Myth syncretizes. A viewer, a gamer or a cybernaut receive myth in geographical areas that it did not expect to reach. Now, in addition, it comes accompanied by audiovisual resources that make it competitive in the global story market. Probably there is currently no more influential media for the transmission of the myth than the series, which circulate not only on cable but also through open television, piracy or on demand systems. The myth has adapted to the new media, although it has to compete with stories about itself that in some cases distort it (Losada & Lipscomb, 2015).⁶

Although cinema has lost its hegemonic position in the statistics about audiovisual consumption, the serial narratives that have relieved it have taken from it the foundations of the imaginary economy that allows the increase of consumers to a massive level. Since cinema is no longer the predominant medium of other times, and if cinema was the means by which myth was communicated most of the 20th century, then the series have been, so far, the great *mythophors* of our time, and *American Gods* is an example of this phenomenon. The commercial logic of the moment, moreover, does not hesitate to recycle the great heroes and their mythology (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 133). In this way, we witness the change that occurred in the dissemination of myth from cinema to tv shows. This change offers the same technological possibilities and, in addition, advantages for the expression of symbolic sets that support the conformation of its metaphoric meaning.

The current tv shows—like cinema—review problems and issues that were previously omitted or treated in a stereotyped way (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 15). An aesthetic of the singular in *American Gods* is also present in the myths of the feminine that find a place in the series, because, in some way, all the characters are marginal.

We are aware that no social commotion of our time has been as deep, as fast and as important for our cultural future as female emancipation. Therefore, the study of myth should not overlook this revolution. If myth codifies the values, the forces of an era, necessarily, cultural myth criticism must consider the manifestation of the feminine myths. We should remember that in the very heart of hypermodernity the dissimilarity of gender positions is restructured. Lipovetsky and Serroy, when discussing the logic of hypercinema, affirm that, after the 70s, films were giving more and more space to feminine characters who were also evolving in activity spheres that were traditionally closed for them (123). Therefore, myth must be also on the verge of restructuration itself along with the feminine.

On the other hand, Gilbert Durand (1992) taught us to read the stories in an articulated, structural, typological way. He insists on the importance of noticing the redundancies and repetitions in cultural objects as well as their symbolic arrangements in order to perform a more complete myth critical examination of the linguistic or visual space. In the case of series or films based on books, the analysis must be done considering their interlinguistic nature, as it is a space in which different languages coexist and must be adapted. Thus, reiterations are signals that guide hermeneutic exercise and lead to meaning. By presenting these feminine myths in interaction, *American Gods* compels us to analyze them as a reiteration that reveals the need of the imagination to present itself to the reader and the viewer for their implicit transcendent discourse, but always from the perspective in which the work has been created, the context of the hypermodernity that conditions this discourse.

4. The Goddesses and the Feminine in *American Gods*

Both Neil Gaiman and Bryan Fuller are artists deeply concerned about the role of female characters. When questioned in an interview in 2017 for British television about the reason for having taken an “artistic license” by portraying women in his new book, *Norse Mythology*—as in the case of Freya, goddess of beauty, fertility and love—Gaiman responded that he did not try to “take her away from the original,” as the journalist with whom he was talking suggested. Gaiman said that, although he was careful with what happens in the existing stories, he was just, in his own words:

[...] amplifying it, giving it color, giving it dialogue. So, Freya, basically, will not be pushed around. Where I have her explaining to the gods that she will not be sold off to a giant in exchange for Thor’s hammer, she just goes to their house and refuses to come out. That’s what happens in Snorri’s story, but what I do is to give her a certain amount of spunk in the dialogue to really make it clear that these goddesses were goddesses with agency. (Channel 4 News)

Gaiman concludes, before an almost inaudible point made by the interviewer, that Freya is “absolutely a feminist.” As we can see, there is a big concern in the author to foster the feminine participation in his plots, what we can find in all the seasons of the *American Gods* tv series.

For his part, Fuller had already demonstrated in the tv show *Hannibal* his sensitivity by giving a greater gender balance in his adaptations of stories and by even changing the sex of some characters that were originally men. That is the case of journalist Fredericka “Freddie” Lounds (Lara Jean Chorostecki) and the FBI psychoanalyst and profiler Alana Bloom (formerly Alan) (Caroline Dhavernas), who received greater prominence this way. Similarly, Fuller created the character Bedelia du Maurier (Gillian Anderson), Hannibal’s psychiatrist, and equates her in genius to the cannibal, famous for his profound intelligence.⁷

In the second season of *American Gods*, for example, Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, will have a more important role than in the book, where she dies very soon. Despite this concern, there is no radical transformation in the role of female characters or in the structure of their myths, because the creators do not set their work in the mystical structures of the imaginary but in the synthetic, according to Durand’s typology.

4.1. The Zoryas

According to Slavic mythology, the Zoryas or Auroras are Zorya Utrennyaya, the goddess of dawn, and Zorya Vechernyaya, the goddess of twilight (Dixon-Kennedy). Although certain versions of the myth refer to a third one, the goddess of midnight, she lacks a name. Neil Gaiman, however, named her Zorya Polunochnaya. The English writer thus gave her greater consistency and perhaps existence. The midnight character is critical to the plot of the first season of *American Gods*. The three Zoryas are daughters of Dazhbog, god of the sun, son of Svarog, god of heaven, and brother of Svarozhich, god of fire. According to the *Encyclopedia of Russian & Slavic Myth and Legend*, the process of forgetting these gods began over a thousand years ago, since “[i]n 988, when Vladimir I married Anna and converted to Christianity, Dazhbog’s huge statue in Kiev was ceremonially toppled into the river, along with the statues of other pagan deities” (Dixon-Kennedy, 62). The subject is not minor in the context of the history studied here, because it is precisely focused on the forgetfulness derived from the arrival of “new gods.” The same case is verified with Ostara, as will be seen. It is evident that history repeats itself and that the book and series repeatedly explain it.

Despite being daughters of the Sun, in *American Gods* they do not live with their father, but with Czernobog, the Black God, brother of Belobog, the White God.⁸ They live in a poor apartment, in Chicago, declining. Each of them naturally has a certain aspect and function. These goddesses have a fundamental symbolic weight. Wednesday and Shadow Moon arrive at the place to recruit Czernobog (Peter Storemare), but he is working, and they must wait for him. While they wait, they are greeted and attended by the oldest of the goddesses, Zorya Vechernyaya (a magnificent Cloris Leachman), for whom Shadow feels sympathy, perhaps because she represents Mercury, the star of the dusk, which precedes and accompanies the Moon. The cyclic character of the goddess is accentuated by one of her functions, the fact that she “closes the gates to her father’s palace after he returns home at the end of the day” (Dixon-Kennedy, 321). The goddess appears in the book as an old and emaciated woman, with a very marked “Eastern European” accent (Gaiman, Chapter Four), which coincides with her origin and which is very well represented in the TV show since we can listen to that accent.

The Zoryas earn some money with fortune telling. This divinatory aspect is significant threefold, since it implies: 1) the possibility of seeing the future, which frames them in a cycle of temporality; 2) that the activity allows them to earn some money to “pay the rent on time,” which inscribes them in a logic of consumption; and 3) that it is at the same time a way of making Shadow see that he is immersed in an alternate world, that is, that he is part of the myth of the “coexistence of two worlds,” although at this moment he still believes that everything is just a fraud, a trick. Here, we should notice that to earn more money, Zorya Vechernyaya has to tell lies, unlike her sisters, who tell the truth, since “the truth is not what people want to hear. It is a bad thing, and it troubles people, so they do not come back. But I can lie to them, tell them what they want to hear. So I bring home the bread” (Gaiman, Chapter Four). It is remarkable that the economic aspect, that of the logic of consumption, also conditions here the representation of myth.

In the series, all this happens in episode 2, “The Secret of the Spoons.” In a corridor, as part of the symbolic scenery, there is an astrological map that shows an asterism with the Big Dipper and the constellation of what was known in the Germanic realm as the Odin’s Wain, a resource that is extremely fortunate for the symbolic decoration. Zorya

Vechernyaya tells Shadow that the “family is with those who survive when you need to survive, even if you don’t like them,” and thus the immanence and a kind of association with economic aspects are manifested again. Before—she remembers—she had servants, and now they are all alone.

Next appears Zorya Utrennyaya (Martha Kelly), identified with the planet Venus, the morning star, whose function (very appropriately) will be to place a warning on the path of the hero. When reading Shadow’s coffee, she first communicates what she sees to his sister, and not to him, because what she saw is terrible. Zorya Utrennyaya, who is “smaller and frailer than her sister, but her hair was long and still golden” (Gaiman, Chapter Four), does not speak in the series, but she expresses herself in the book. It seems that this modification happens because these events occur in the afternoon, near dinner, not the time of this Aurora, which is a clever adaptation consideration.

Finally, Zorya Polunochnaya (Erika Kaar), the midnight star, appears in the next chapter, the third one of the TV shows: “Head Full of Snow.” Shadow wakes up and sees an open window, through which he gains access to the emergency stairs that allow him to reach the rooftop. There he finds a very beautiful Zorya Polunochnaya using a telescope to observe in the sky the same constellations that were on the map in the corridor of the hall. She tells Shadow that “the Buffalo is waning tonight,” which reinforces the astrologic and symbolic zoological decoration. The Aurora explains to Shadow that she and her sisters watch the sky day and night to make sure that the Great Bear (“one thing, and not a god, like a god [...] a bad thing”) continues chained up in those stars and does not escape and “eat it all” because the world would end. Thus, the Zoryas also have a protective role consistent with the mythology version (Dixon-Kennedy, 322).

Zorya Polunochnaya, in the show but not in the book, reads the palm of Shadow’s hand doubling the divinatory sense, although on this occasion the prediction is not threatening, but positive, because she tells him that he has begun a path “from nothing to everything,” which is consistent with the path of the hero as noted by Joseph Campbell (2008). Zorya Polunochnaya (declaring herself a virgin, which is important for fortune telling because as she says “virgins have the advantage”) offers help in exchange for a kiss, after which she takes the moon from the sky and gives it to Shadow in the form of a silver coin of a 1922 dollar with the effigy of Liberty, which will be an amulet. Here the female character also fulfills the role of an adjuvant, and the audiovisual resource is very useful to affirm it, because in the shot, from the bottom up, it can be seen that, when the moon rises, its light disappears. Finally, Zorya Polunochnaya orders Shadow to wake up, so he does not know if she was real or just a dream. Shadow, nevertheless, will have the amulet in his hand.

It is remarkable how Gaiman and Fuller match this Slavic myth with the story they tell, each empowering it with their own resources. First Gaiman with his high sense of the symbolic and then Fuller with his enormous ability to make something visually significant. The Zoryas will therefore be protective guardians who must guarantee the existence of the world and the beginning of a new day.

4.2. Ostara

In his search for allies, Wednesday wishes to recruit Ostara. Also known as Eostre, she is the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, fertility, land and harvest, in any case, associated with a fruitful restart of the cycle. This is Easter, and it was Jacob Grimm who in 1835, in his *Deutsche Mythologie*, recreated—from the etymology of *Ostern* (Sermon, 331, 335)—

the name “Ostara” as the Germanic equivalent and who claimed that she was related to the East and to dawn, much like the Greek Eos and the Roman Aurora. There are obvious similarities with the Zoryas, as can be inferred.

Ostara (Kristin Chenoweth) does not appear until the last episode of the first season, “Come to Jesus,” very differently than in the book, where she only meets Wednesday and Shadow at a picnic in San Francisco. In the series, on the other hand, she meets them at a party in a Kentucky mansion, where vegetation, flowers, trees and water surfaces abound, with a vast variety not only of food, cookies and candy but also of people inside, among them, several Jesuses. “For every belief, every branch, every denomination they see a different face when they close their eyes to pray,” Wednesday says when showing the Jesuses to Shadow Moon at the party.

As it is known, Easter is the main holiday of Christianity, and in this case, it is evidenced on the screen with a motley proliferation of reproductions of Christic denominations. For example, Shadow sees a Virgin (reiteration of the virginity of Zorya Polunochnaya) breastfeeding a baby Jesus and with a halo around her. The resurrection of Christ is tied with the pagan “resurrection” of the year, of life, of sowing. It is another example of religious syncretism so well perceived by Gaiman and fostered by Fuller and their team.

Scenography for this sequence includes rabbits (serving as messengers for Ostara), eggs, a figure of the Sacred Heart, among other things. When Wednesday explains to Shadow that it is a pagan party from twelve thousand years ago, a reproduction of *Ophelia* (1889), by John William Waterhouse, can be seen behind him, which reinforces the mythical feminine scenography of the place. As it is known, the English painter was known for his depictions of women from Greek mythology and the Arthurian cycle. In this case, a painting that places the Shakespeare’s characters lying in a field full of flowers is also a nod to the viewer who knows the literary origin of the series.

When Wednesday tells Shadow that everything people do at Easter, like decorating eggs, is done unconsciously on behalf of Ostara, he points to her at the very moment she turns to the viewer and a radiant glow emerges from her blond hair, emphasizing her attribute, once again thanks to digital technology. She wears a flowered dress and a matching hat. Shadow is beginning to believe in the existence of the gods. He sees Ostara chatting with a young Jesus with a halo. He sees how colored candy falls down to the floor through the nail holes of the hands of another older, gray-haired Jesus. These are important things for the revelation to occur that will happen a little later, when Wednesday reveals he is Odin and unlashes his lightning against the new gods.

When invited to participate in the war, Ostara refuses saying that she is not one of them, to which Wednesday replies that she is “as forgotten, and as unloved and as unremembered as any of us.” When she says that she is doing well, Grimmir, as he is also called, shows her the party’s syncretism and makes her see that the celebration is held in the name of Jesus and that therefore she has been supplanted: “Does anybody pray in your name? Do they say it in worship? Oh, they mouth your name, hmm, but they have no idea what it means. None whatsoever. Same every spring. You do all the work, he gets all the prayers.” As can be seen, it is an economy of faith, to which the gods are subject. The gods—both the old gods and the new gods—have been fighting to monopolize the “faith market.”

Shortly afterwards it is possible to realize that there is a third intertextual overlap after the Christian connections, because Ostara meets Media (Gillian Anderson), the

“new” goddess of the media, with whom she has made a kind of commercial deal for her to remain relatively present. Media appears as David Bowie, Marilyn Monroe or as Lucy Ricardo (the character played by Lucille Ball). This resource makes Media a character that adapts her image to the context and uses a sort of different “disguises.” In this part of the series, Media appears as Hannah Brown, played by actress Judy Garland in the very successful 1948 film significantly titled *Easter Parade*. The encounter between the old and the new goddesses is full of hypocrisy, and by the tone in which they speak one can perceive that it is a cordial relationship by obligation, a business relationship. Media tells Ostara: “We popularized the pagan. We practically invented brunch. We built this holiday. You and me.” Things start to get tense because each side knows that the other is present: the old gods now know the new gods just arrived. Ostara confesses to Media that she feels “poorly represented in the media,” in reply to which the new goddess demands that Ostara drown that feeling, and in that way, she launches a threat by telling Ostara that what is at stake is “religious Darwinism: adapt and survive.”

Ostara finally agrees to what Wednesday asked—“Show them who you are”—to force people to pray to them using her powers against humans. “She withholds, she returns. Prayer, reward. The ancient contract,” says Odin. Ostara’s rebellion makes everything dry and gray, which is shown in an impressive scene that gradually transforms the colors of life into the colors of death, in an imposing manifestation of the power of feminine myth, by drying the fields and the sown, reversing life that was unfolding. Ostara’s face and body are covered with rose petals and her hair is released and loosened when she demonstrates her enormous power, because when she shows it, she finally expresses herself as she really is and feels satisfied. This is how the war between the old and new gods is formally declared.

5. Conclusions

In the 1950s, Karl Kerényi understood very well the essence of mythology in modern times and highlighted its dynamic and material nature linked to permanent creation. For the Hungarian scholar, mythology is an art united and consubstantial with poetry. The mythologems, that is, “the ancient elements transmitted by tradition [...] that deal with gods and divine beings, fighting heroes and descent into hell [...] do not exclude the continuation of another more advanced creation” (2012, 17, our translation). *American Gods* is one of these creations and those of the goddesses discussed here are among re-creations. For all that they add, the elements of audiovisual production—hypermodern but contained by a sense of Fuller’s *mythologemized* imagination—make images progress, as Kerényi points out, in a way that “becomes a work of art” (2012, 17, our translation).

Gilbert Durand (1992, 403) describes cyclic symbols as the basis of the synthetic structures of the imaginary, with an orientation to a universal totalizing harmonization constituted by astrobiological systems. This *principe de l’harmonisation* functions not only at the level of seasonal or biological opposites, but also in the constant and reciprocal passage from the macrocosm to the human microcosm. As can be seen, it is the principle that conveys the function of the feminine part of the cosmos represented by the goddesses that we have analyzed here. The synthesis is not a unification like mysticism, it does not point to the confusion of terms, but to the coherence that safeguards distinctions, oppositions. As we said before, cyclic symbols communicate the desire to defeat death “operating on the substance of time itself, domesticating the future” (Durand, 1992, 321, our translation).

The principle of harmonization is the one that transmits to women the function of the feminine part of the cosmos represented by the goddesses that we have analyzed here. Cyclic symbols play to communicate the desire to defeat death. That is exactly what the Zoryas and Ostara represent. The Moon appears as the first measure of time (Durand 1992, 326) and the lunar symbolism of the Zoryas—especially the one attached to Zorya Polunochnaya—is the one that leads this protection against time, that is, against death. The Moon in the form of a coin will save Shadow Moon from total darkness and will give him the chance to resurrect the world of the gods in an apotheosis narrated in chapter sixteen of the book (Gaiman, 438-451). On the other hand, the year marks the precise point where imagination dominates the contingent fluidity of time through a spatial figure, and this annual cycle is the one represented by Ostara, which can also embody, as we saw, a “*réhabilitation mythique du mal*” (using terminology from Durand 1992, 336) when she decides to withdraw her goodness.

The divine maiden and her fortune-telling sisters, givers of the moon amulet that matches the last name of the hero, Shadow Moon, and the beautiful Ostara with her flowers and Easter rabbits are artistic representations of the cyclical—of the day, of the seasons—and are here to communicate confidence amidst the confusion of hypermodernity. If postmodernity lacked hope and hypermodernity is characterized by the exponential increase in the values of modernity, then we find in these characters a kind of return to faith despite economic conflicts and the damaging influence of the media.

This feeling of uprooting is precisely what demands critical attention: it is necessary to recover, resume ties with traditions, with ancestors. There is no other reason for this return to myth in literature, arts and contemporary media. This is the reason of the presence of the myths of the feminine in the remarkable product that is *American Gods*. The TV show makes us reflect about the way we perceive and communicate with the sacred feminine “Now that we’re living in an atheist world,” in which it is difficult for someone to believe in “anything that doesn’t have a screen anymore,” as Media says, the spokeswoman for the new gods that is perfectly aware of the environment in which we live.

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Notes

¹ Divine immanence appears more and more and in many different products, such as in the remake of *Fury of the Titans* (Desmond Davies, 1981) by Louis Leterrier (*Clash of the Titans*, 2010) and the sequel by Jonathan Liebesman (*Wrath of the Titans*, 2012), for example, where gods die if they do not receive prayers. In *American Gods*, immanence is made explicit in the

- title of the sixth episode of the series, "A Murder of Gods," which also makes a pun: murder means killing, but also a flock or a group (in the sense of association), as in "a murder of crows." It is possible that, for the dramatic tone and the theme of betrayal, the title is also a tribute to the excellent 1999 film *A murder of crows* directed by Rowdy Herrington.
- ² The animals are representative of the American cultural identity, both of the native and of the migrant, and they are present in a recurring manner in different spaces and scenes. Eagles and buffalos, for example, play a symbolic role. The eagle appears in the excellent main title sequence, crowning a totem that also includes a space rocket, a gunman, a meditating Buddha and a crucified astronaut, all between neon lights. This work received a nomination in the 2017 Emmy Awards for Outstanding Main Title Design.
- ³ The name of Odin will not be revealed until the end of the first season in a theophanic scene that recreates an analogue one coming from the *Poetic Edda*, in an example of intertextuality like those studied by Irina Rata in her article "The role of intertextuality in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*." Intertextuality is, in addition, a fundamental structural resource in a work like this, but the intratextuality in the series is another subject that could be studied elsewhere.
- ⁴ We offer here the original quote in Portuguese: "programadas para educar por meio do som e da imagem em movimento como reflexo do real. Falo de educação no sentido de treinamento para ser e estar em sociedade, no sentido de produção informação disfarçada de conhecimento, como fornecedor de modelos para viver coletivamente" (Wendel de Camargo, 24).
- ⁵ To find out about the prizes and awards that The Mythopoeic Society offers, see <http://www.mythsoc.org/awards.htm>.
- ⁶ See J. M. Losada & A. Limpscomb, *Myths in Crisis: The Crisis of Myth* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), to understand phenomena linked to this myth.
- ⁷ It should be noted that both Caroline Dhavernas and Gillian Anderson (famous for her role as Dana Scully in *The X Files*) have been recurring actresses in Fuller's series. Dhavernas had the leading role in *Wonderfalls* and Anderson plays the extraordinarily important character of Media in *American Gods*. Anderson even gave up continuing in the second season without Fuller's direction, probably because, as an experienced actress, she knows the risk of distorting the character (Bentley). In the same way, Fuller has repeatedly worked with directors, musicians and creative artists in one or another of his shows, which has contributed to the fact that he has been able to develop a particular aesthetic and a working group knowledgeable about the aesthetic that enhances the stories.
- ⁸ Both gods represent evil and good, associated with the color that is their attribute and the etymological origin of their name. Czernobog was the representation of evil, darkness and death, but in the book and in the series his immanence is verified, because with the passage of time he and his brother are now gray. The opposition between the good (white) and the bad (black) is thus overcome, with a taste of nostalgia and feeling of weakness.

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