Testing the Resilience of the Myth in the Audiovisual Creation

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Myth and the Audiovisual Creation. By José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb (Eds.). Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2019.

Abstract

The book *Myth and the Audiovisual Creation* (2019), edited by José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb, is a well-organized, thought provoking and multilingual collection that displays a deep knowledge in the analysis of reception of myths in contemporary audiovisual formats. Its objective: to test the resilience of the myth in the field of films, television series and video games while becoming a platform for reflection on the current standardization of contents and versatility of formats. As the book brightly exposes, new interdisciplinary challenges arise in the face of the digital turn and its profound transformation puts forward new questions that address the extent to how "technological changes are affecting mythical stories" (Losada 2019, 26).The book's examination is carried out from a cultural myth-criticism approach, observing the attempts in this field to "pseudo-mystify historical figures, romantic ideas or metaphors" that deeply permeate audiovisual cultural manifestations (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 7). The articles in this volume gather well known experts in the field and European and American researchers who, in testing the authenticity in mythical narratives, undertake a rigorous cultural myth-criticism analysis of successful films and popular television series. As their inquiries unfold, they address the impact of transcendence in our lives, still a prevailing element in audiovisual creations.

Keywords: Myth, authenticity, cultural myth criticism, audiovisual creation, films, television series, video games.

1. Introduction

With special emphasis in the field of films, television series and video games, as stated by the editors José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb, *Myth and the Audiovisual Creation*[1] is intended to test the resilience of the myth (2019, 7) and to prove its endurance and validity in the face of a paramount storytelling paradigm shift brought forward by technological advances undergone since the end of the 20th century. Driven by a global distribution network, which online formats facilitate, together with the ongoing expanding individual and collective consumption markets, unprecedented audiovisual developments have altered the very fabric of the interactions between the receivers and the new formats. In correlation, in recent decades, global markets are witnessing a greater revolution in terms of "the standardization of content and the versatility of formats" (Losada 2019, 19).

In a move that encompasses a reflective gesture towards the systematic changes brought forward by the digital revolution, this volume, a well-organized, thought provoking and multilingual collection, becomes a platform for reflection on the current situation, as Losada asserts, that makes it "necessary to reflect on the new modulation myths receive" (41). As the book brightly exposes, new interdisciplinary challenges arise in the face of the digital turn and its profound transformation puts forward new questions that address the extent to which "technological changes are affecting mythical stories" (26).

The book's examination is carried out from a cultural myth-criticism approach, "the study of transformations of the myth in contemporary society" (26), observing the attempts in this field to "pseudo-mystify historical figures, romantic ideas or metaphors" that deeply permeate audiovisual cultural manifestations (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 7). As we will see, the articles in this volume gather together experts in the field and well known European and American researchers providing a cultural myth-criticism analysis of successful films and popular television series aimed at unveiling the continuous dedication to the impact of transcendence in our lives.

Indeed, fascination around myths can be said to have haunted human beings of all ethnical backgrounds since the beginning of times. Impelled by the commitment to find answers to humanity's origins and destiny, drastic advances in science are providing nowadays a platform to replace mythical narratives. In this scenario, current artificial inflation of "myths" (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 7) necessarily calls for interrogation and revision. With the digital turn, mythical narratives not only have witnessed an explosion of new formats, but they also had to adapt to an audiovisual storytelling process not always thoughtful about its authentic mythical account. When digital interactions allow for transgression and ambiguity and when "linearity become[s] meaningless" (41), the question then arises of how to identify the authenticity in mythical stories.

2. José Manuel Losada, "Myth in the Digital Age"

In his introductory article, written both in English and Spanish, "Myth in the Digital Age"/ "El mito y la era digital," José Manuel Losada provides guidance in answering this question by articulating a definition in progress that becomes an applicable formula to test the authentic mythical narratives in audiovisual formats. Its identification illustrates the essential narrative elements and requirements of mythical narratives that differentiates it from other types of narrative accounts. As he annotates, authenticity in the myth is unraveled if it comprises the following:

> Explanatory, symbolic and dynamic account of one or various personal and extraordinary events with transcendent referent, that lacks in principle of historical testimony; is made up of a series of invariant elements reducible to themes submitted to crisis; that presents a conflictive, emotive and functional character, and always refers to an absolute cosmogony or eschatology, either particular or universal. (20)

As it can be inferred, to pass the "authentic narrative test" the requirements that must be met are: that the story, always with transcendent denotations, tells incredible events regarding the origin of the universe (cosmogony) and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind (eschatology); that the story, lacking historical evidence, is told in a "explanatory, symbolic and dynamic account" and parts of the story correspond to

"themes submitted to crisis." Finally, the protagonist of the story must be a highly uncanny figure who is a "conflictive, emotive and functional character" (see above, 20). When these premises are met, the story therefore can be claimed to be authentically mythical.

Testing the resilience of the myth, Losada's definition can be celebrated as an illuminating "testing-formula" in progress able to distinguish authentic mythical accounts from appropriations.

His research covers three areas of study: 1) traditional myths in films, Classical, Germanic and Biblical (21-28); 2) Myth and Science Fiction in TV Series (28-36), and 3) Myth and Fantasy in Video Games (36-42).

In the section of classical myths in films, through the application of his testing principle, Losada discloses how ancient myths are still a vivid source of inspiration within the film industry. As an example, *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis 1981) and the two sequels released in 3D, *Clash of the Titans* (Louis Leterrier 2010), and *Wrath of the Titans* (Jonathan Liebesman 2012), "essentially base their plots on the adventures of Perseus and Andromeda […] boldly paired with the Hesiod's *Theogony* and Homer's *Odyssey*," Losada explains (21).[2] What is really interesting in his analysis is the examination of a "not self-sustaining" depiction of transcendence, just psychological transcendence (Gods and titans depends on humans' belief for their survival), which paradoxically mirrors and yields some clues into contemporary relations with the supernatural.

When revising Germanic myths in films, "there is no shortage of examples of Norse myths," affirms Losada (24).[3] Examples range from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson 2001-2003), based on the novel by the same name, by J. R. R. Tolkien (1937-49), to films that portray mythical Scandinavian characters such as in *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh 2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) and *Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi 2017) manufactured by the "Marvel Cinematic Universe" (25). Undoubtedly, it is precisely the wide diversification in use and meaning that Scandinavian mythology is currently undergoing, without there "being clear boundaries between Wagner and the Marvel Universe's Thor comics," what necessarily calls for an examination on their interpretative framework (24).

The same line of reflection applies to the intimate relationship between myth and religion. "Religion is at the root of all myths," Losada clarifies, "because it is impossible to discuss myth in the scientific sense without personal or cosmic transcendence relative to an absolute cosmogony or eschatology (general or particular)" (26). In this line, the film *Noah* (Darren Aronofsky 2014), which characterizes one of the main myths of all religions, the flood, successfully accomplishes the premises for an authentic mythical audiovisual recreation (27).

Furthermore, in the section Myth and Science Fiction in TV series, Losada proposes an engaging discussion about what it can be called, considering the "usurpation of the extreme" by science fiction unparalleled high-tech effects. An emblematic example is found in the *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang 1927) where an android transcends human limits. Moreover, in a more contemporary format, the ten episodes of the first season of the television series *Westworld* are accurately scrutinized containing three essential myths: "the existence of two heterogeneous worlds […], the creation of human beings […] and the labyrinth or maze" (32). Applying again his testing myth-criticism paradigm, it is pointedly in the androids' process of "awakening of consciousness" (31), at the intersection between artificial intelligence and emotional consciousness, where we can

identify the existence of individual cosmogony in the story. Indeed, it is in "the passage from mechanical existence to human existence"– where the myth can be uncovered (31). In addition, there is consideration to be acknowledged in the interaction between science fiction and myth, when it potentially allows for the troubling acceptance, by the viewers of androids' world, of moral categories as superior to those of humans.

In the final section, Myth and Fantasy in Video Games, the video games *Kingdom Hearts*, *Dark Souls*, *The Last Guardian* and *One Piece* put myths to the test. These very popular virtual games recreate "imaginary adventures between gods, humans and animals, often originating in or related to mythology" (37). In here, the true challenge in discovering the authentic mythical narrative relies on our ability to differentiate between the blurring boundaries between fantasy and magic. For this reason, it is in this format where the call for an intellectual and academic rigor is even greater. As Losada cautions:

> Myths may contain situations of magic and fantasy, but fantasy is not a guarantee of myth: only when there is absolute cosmogony or eschatology, whether personal or universal, and a supernatural transcendence, whether cosmic or personal, there is myth. (39)

Accordingly, when following the essential presumptions of an authentic mythical account found in "cosmogony or eschatology and supernatural transcendence," it can therefore be unearthed how both "science fiction and video games often contain camouflaged mythical narratives" (25) waiting to be unriddled.

Another important aspect to remark upon is that José Manuel Losada offers myth-criticism's researchers informed recommendations and knowledgeable guidelines. Firstly, he reminds researchers that their analysis deals exclusively with myths (26) and their examination cannot be reduced to "the progressive convergence of plots" between the mythical narration and the audiovisual recreation; on the contrary, their main duty is "to unravel the myth" (29). Secondly, he emphasizes the need to test the mythical narratives for their transcendence; that is, if there is no transcendent dimension, no authenticity can be claimed in the myth (21). Thirdly, he advises to be on the alert for the beclouded boundaries between fantasy and mythology: only then, distinctions between characters that are mythical and those that are not (37) can be clearly made. And even when the audiovisual creation does not meet any of the requirements of the "testing formula," to be considered an authentical mythical narrative, as in the case of *Æon Flux* video game, the researcher's responsibility is to discern "the referential function of the myth in an amythic context" (38). Finally, Losada consciously instructs on the misleading "tendency, common in the academic world, to apply empirical scientism to religion, mythology and literature" (25).

In sum, his introductory article is notably documented and enlightening. Apart from brilliantly crafting the unprecedented changes that audiovisual creation has undergone during 20th and 21st century (from traditional drawing, painting, sculpture, to cinema, science fiction and video games), it successfully conveys a solid cultural myth criticism framework capable of testing authenticity within the dynamic nature and character of the myths that are being recreated in audiovisual formats. Furthermore, his introduction offers a rigorous analysis and application of cultural-myth criticism's premises that both instruct on the disciplinary tenets of the field and provide an argumentative framework in which to contextualize the rest of the articles of the collection.

In an age and time when the boundaries between creativity and verisimilitude are no longer apparent, his examination interrogates to what extent innovation and adaptability

of virtual interactions can guarantee authenticity in the mythical narratives. In the following section of the book, well-informed, skilled and insightful researchers, from various European and American universities, carry this interrogation further. Their multilingual articles (English, Spanish and French) have been organized around four main categories of analysis: ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary myths.

3. Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary Myths

With the title "Variantes modernes sur le mythe de la métamorphose" (Modern Variants on the Metamorphosis Myth), the first article in the section of "Ancient Myths" is written in French by Pierre Brunel. In his study, the myth of metamorphosis is reviewed through the film *Métamorphoses*, by Christophe Honoré (2014) and it is approached as the vicissitude of the Ovid's stories in today's France. In addition, it provides a brief but detailed outline of some metamorphosis in music (Richard Strauss, Michaël Levinas), in painting (Júlio Pomar, Gérard Garouste) and in the lyrical prose (Claudel).

The next article that deals with ancient myths is written in Spanish by Belén Galván, entitled "Orfeo desciende a la logia negra: recepción y actualización del mito de Orfeo en *Twin Peaks* (1990-2017)" (Orpheus' descent to the Black Lodge: reception of Orpheus' myth in *Twin Peaks*, 1990-2017). In it, Galván brightly proposes an in-depth inquiry in the mythical narrative pattern of the descent to the underworld in the TV show *Twin Peaks* (seasons 1 and 2, the film *Fire Walk with Me*, 1992, and *Twin Peaks: The Return*, 2017). Testing the resilience of Orpheus' myth, intertextual connections with the myth are strongly recognized in the evolution of the character of Agent Dale Cooper. Arguing for a plausible identification with the Orphic mythical tradition of the hero, agent Cooper is characterized as "an Orpheus-like figure" (93).

In the final article of this section, Metka Zupancic undertakes a dazzling examination on the ability to recognize how mythical schemes are incorporated in the film *Mother!* (Darren Aronofsky 2017) into new mythical narrative(s). In the intersection between myth criticism and recent film studies, her article, "Aronofsky's *Mother!* (2017): The Disturbing Power of Syncretic Mythical Paradigms," lays out some of the aesthetic, emotional, intellectual and spiritual functions of the mythical paradigms utilized in the film. Moreover, Zupancic interrogates to what extent overlapping mythical schemes can be discerned by the viewers and if so, what possible impact they might have on the audience. In the analysis of the myth of the eternal return, the dominating structural component of the film, the allegory of the "Mother Nature" is unearthed as the recurring healing promise against narcissistic sexism. This, in turn, exposes the conflict ingrained at the center of ethical dilemmas. Equivalently, her paper insightfully advocates for a sense "of responsibility and empathy in view of the sacrifices inflicted upon the Great Mother, and by extension, upon our universe" (112).

Moving on to the next section, in "Struggle, Purification and Renewal: A Study of the Shinto Elements in Miyazaki Hayao's films *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*," Saul Andreetti argues that Miyazaki Hayao's films potentially become a platform for the recreation of Japanese mythical narratives. In the particular examination of the structure of both films, *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001), the mythical pattern of initial struggle, ensuing purification and final renewal is successfully tested. Furthermore, acknowledging *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* traditions, Andreetti's analysis displays how anime is an acceptable tool to construct a mythical past and make it accessible and appealing to Japanese and international modern audiences.

In the exploration of a different format, Luis Alberto Pérez Amezcua in his article, "Mito y mistagogia hipermoderna en *American Gods*," written in Spanish, interrogates the reasons behind the current success of medieval mythical accounts on the global markets of audiovisual recreation. His observation is focused on the TV show *American Gods* (2017), based on the homonymous novel by Neil Gaiman. His theoretical framework relies on José Manuel Losada's cultural myth-criticism theories, coupled with Lipovetsky and Serroy premises on hypermodernity and cinema.

In the next section, "Modern Myths," two articles approach the figure of Don Juan in current film production. On the one hand, in "La genesis de *Don Giovanni* según Carlos Saura," Alessia Faiano focuses on the intersemiotic, metatheatrical and hyperdiscoursive aspects that characterize Carlos Saura's film *Don Giovanni* (2009). In the task of unraveling Don Juan's myth, the historical dimension of the characters and the fictional dimension of the mythical narrative are subjected to myth-criticism's scrutiny. On the other hand, Antoaneta Robova evaluates the adaptability of Don Juanism in a broader film production scope in "Métamorphoses cinématographiques contemporaines de Don Juan" (Contemporary cinema metamorphoses of Don Juan). Thus, through films such as *The Man Who Loved Women* (1983), *Don Juan DeMarco* (1994), *Don Jon* (2013) or *Irrésistible Alfie* (2004), mythical invariants are tested for authenticity. Transformation and modernization of the mythomaniac behavior of Don Juan is further investigated along esthetics trends of contemporary cinema such as in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1997) and *Don Juan DeMarco* or *Don Jon*.

The last section of the book is devoted to "Contemporary Myths." In the first of its articles, Signe Cohen, in "The Oracle in Your Pocket: The Mythology of Siri," sagely considers the growing body of popular myths currently being formed around intelligent personal assistants, such as Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa, and Microsoft's Cortana. In her review, Cohen sensibly exposes how these contemporary mythologies, created around these virtual assistants, simulate the religious beliefs surrounding traditional instruments of communication with the divine, such as the ancient Egyptian *shabti*, the Biblical *teraphim*, and the oracular heads ascribed to Orpheus, Pope Sylvester II, and Friar Roger Bacon.

In "La mitificación del nazismo en *El niño con el pijama de rayas*" (The Mythification of Nazism in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*), María Jesús Fernández Gil proposes an examination of the role that Hollywoodian cinema plays in the invention of a mythicized conception of Nazism. In particular, Fernández Gil argues that Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993) can be credited to be responsible for the normalization of the myth of the struggle between good and evil, setting the tone in Hollywood over the following decades. Revolting against binary illustrations of the holocaust and firmly opposing "victims vs victimizers' dichotomy," Fernández Gil notably exposes the changes that this narrative frame has undergone in recent years. And it does so, by contrasting the *Schindler's List* with the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Mark Herman 2008).

Moreover, in "Los viajes en el tiempo y la tradición" (Time Travel and Tradition), Javier Martínez Villarroya analyzes the mythical precedents of one of the most recurring arguments in science fiction: the journey in time. Taking as starting point the works of Joseph Campbell and the method of convergence by Gilbert Durand, Martínez Villarroya markedly demonstrates that some of the myths of the universal mythology are constantly a source for science fiction recreation. As he argues, public's fascination with science fiction conjecture of time travel may derive from the very premises that

demonstrate the validity of its mythical account. According to Martínez Villarroya, these would be: 1) the time of the ordinary world is false; 2) consequently, time is relative; 3) ultimately, time does not exist (what exists is eternity).

In the last of the articles of this section, Carmen Rivero Iglesias provides a perceptive postmodern framework for reflection. In "Realidad y simulacro: la desmitificación de la técnica en *Abre los ojos*" (Reality and Simulacrum: The De- Mythification of Technology in *Open Your Eyes*), Rivero Iglesias draws a parallelism between the demystification of technology in Amenabar's film *Open Your Eyes* (1997) and critical theories of media societies. In her inquiry, Amenábar's second film is interpreted in contrast to Baudrillard's conception of reality as simulacrum; in addition, it provides a platform for reflection on the role of cinema as an intermediate in postmodern cultures.

Indeed, it is in the vehement invitation to reflection, observation and academic rigor that the common thread that unites all the articles of all these sections is found. Furthermore, these articles display an "innovative methodology that draws from the real nature of the contents of fiction," that is, "they sustain that the represented history has its own true life" (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 8). And they do so by rescuing the authentic mythical narrative from the shaping forces of our contemporary societies and their global markets of production and consumption.

Together, all the contributors demonstrate that myths, either ancient, medieval, modern or contemporary, need to be considered as valid tools capable of helping us understand the conundrum of human nature and the eternal questions regarding our world and our destiny. Brilliantly articulating the transformations of myth in our time, this international and multilingual collection of articles correspondingly develops into a compelling intellectual testimony of how the digital revolution—in particular film, television series and video games—unquestionably and undeniably impacts mythical stories.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, in our digital times, it can be argued that the growing fascination with mythical accounts is coupled exponentially with the proliferation of new audiovisual formats of storytelling. What this volume demonstrates, nevertheless, is that this fascination cannot be separated from humans' eternal quest for transcendence in their lives; for a supernatural dimension as grounded as revelatory in the eternal questions of humanity's origins and destiny.

Nowadays, unprecedented technological advances within contemporary audiovisual formats urge us to frame the right questions when seeking authenticity in mythical narrations. To these means, this book both shows us the way and accompanies us in the successful application of cultural myth-criticism testing premises aimed at assessing reliability in the digital recreations of the myth. As it has been shown, all the articles display a deep knowledge about the analysis of reception of myths in contemporary audiovisual formats. Interestingly enough, testing the accurate adaptability of mythical stories, it can be argued that they all point at one legitimate cause for the resilience of the myth in the digital area: the realization that myths "continue to be a particularly suitable tool for the knowledge of our society and of ourselves" (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 8).

Capturing the spirit of an emerging and exciting field of study, expanding through practice and inquiry, this work is a substantial and important contribution that both instructs and inspires. As an overall conclusion, it should be highlighted that the

carefully selected articles guide new and established researchers to engage in critical reflection in the quest for authentic mythical modulations in the ever-expanding 21st century digital latitudes. Its literary and cultural significance, within the field of humanities at large and cultural myth criticism in particular, makes *Myth and the Audiovisual Creation* an essential read for scholars and students in the field.

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Notes

[1] As stated by the editors, José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb, *Myth and Audiovisual Creation* continues the reflection started a decade ago in the following volumes:

Myth and Emotions (edited by José Manuel Losada & Antonella Lipscomb), Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 345 pp.

Mitos de hoy. Ensayos de mitocritica cultural (edited by José Manuel Losada), Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2016, 211 pp.

Myths in Crisis: The Crisis of Myth (edited by José Manuel Losada & Antonella Lipscomb), Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, 441 pp.

Nuevas formas del mito. Una metodologia interdisciplinar (edited by José Manuel Losada), Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2015, 221 pp.

Abordajes. Mitos y reflexiones sobre el mar (edited by José Manuel Losada), Madrid: Instituto Espanol de Oceanografia, 2014, 274 pp., 95 illustr.

Mito e interdisciplinariedad. Los mitos antiguos, medievales y modernos en la literatura y las artes contemporaneas (edited by José Manuel Losada & Antonella Lipscomb), Bari (Italy): Levante Editori, 2013, 458 pp., 80 illustr.

Myth and Subversion in the Contemporary Novel (edited by José ManuelLosada & Marta Guirao), Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 523 pp.

Mito y mundo contemporaneo. La recepcion de los mitos antiguos, medievalesy modernos en la literatura contemporanea (edited by José Manuel Losada), Bari (Italy): Levante Editori, 2010, 785 pp., 45 illustr. International Research Award "Giovi – Città di Salerno" (Italy).

[2] In addition, there is no doubt, as Losada asserts, "that the adventures of *Westworld* imply, in an original hellish setting, a modern reproduction of the Cretan myth" (29).

[3] As José Manuel Losada elucidates, Norse mythology originates almost exclusively from medieval Iceland, which was later appropriated as a shared legacy by other Scandinavian peoples and subsequently by Germanic peoples (22).

References

Losada, José Manuel, ed. (2015). *Nuevas formas del mito. Una metodología interdisciplinar*. Berlin: Logos Verlag.

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