Fundamental Mythology of Television

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One of the more significant memories adults have of their childhoods is of the stories once read to them. The cherished memory of a favourite story ensures a kind of immortality for it - one their children are likely to inherit. The basic component in the study of mythology is that the stories inherent in every culture have survived timelessly. The plots centering around variations of the notion of good over evil appear in almost every story presented. In this age, rather than sitting at the feet of a travelling professional teller of tales, to sagas of heroic actions, **we have an electronic story teller.** Television has displaced the gentler pastime and has become an intruder, a kind of benevolent despot, in many homes. **Modern heroes, speaking modern slang, nevertheless still deal in time-honoured themes.**

The notion of progress is one of our great national investments. The amount of money spent in the media to protect it exceeds our wildest fantasies. It is part and parcel of boosting the vast optimism which has contributed, for better and for worse, to what we are today: a truly godlike trait to be attributed to the media. **Certainly, nothing is more treasonable than to suggest that we are not improving, that we are not improvable, for indeed, where then would McGarrett, Kojak, Rockford, et al be in the enormous scheme of television's contribution to the expansion of the human spirit.**

This paper, then, will attempt to draw comparisons between the themes and attitudes incumbent in the study of mythology with the themes and attitudes to be found in television programming. To begin the foray into this task, it is necessary to ask if myth is the expression of all living reality?

If each person would examine his own life objectively and without pretense, he would be forced to admit that much of what he thinks and does has its origins in some mythical time. I use the word 'force' for a purpose for it is generally believed, in today's very secular world, that myths are merely childish expressions of the thoughts of man before he was enlightened by science, that somehow they
belong to a world completely alien to our own thinking. However, it may be due to the fact that myths are not looked upon (except by the field of psychology which sees behaviour patterns in myths) with favour simply because there is no common denominator of language with which to talk about them. James Taylor wrote in his article entitled, "A Brief Introduction to Mythology":

One continuing problem has been the absence of a language for talking about myths. Given the immense superficial variety of myths (and of television production), a systematic procedure has to be developed...where underlying patterns and regularities become more easily identifiable. In the language of a linguist, we need a grammar of myth.\(^1\)

Taylor's comments are well taken. Of course, different people created different myths according to the specific norms of language of their cultures but in spite of these differences, all myths have one thing in common. Rather than employ Taylor's phrase "grammar of myth", perhaps it would be more accurate to label it "language [or grammar] of symbolism." Later, there will be a brief discussion of some specific symbolic forms to illustrate the similarities of understanding, most notably between the world of mythology and television.

In this highly critical age, it is the writer's opinion that the study of myth lies somewhere in the seeming unresolved split between western rationalism and one's strong leaning toward the psychical abstract. On one hand, the myths of the ancients record religious ideals and moral conduct while on the other hand, they race after the elusiveness of knowledge, as found in imagination, feelings of greatness, immortality and ultimately, survival of one's being.

A current example of the ever-present interest in the human condition is the programme, "60 Minutes". This programme's format, based on a seeming limitless budget and truly expert research, includes three 12-minute segments on a variety of social topics such as cancer research (the controversy over laetrile); an interview with an American nurse whose main function is to prepare people for death; the credit card syndrome and its effects on individuals. The remainder of the show is reserved for a debate between two journalists on a timely topic (usually one that has made headlines during the previous week). Each story is a "variant of one basic story"\(^2\) that being the negative effect the 'system' has over people and the
Oedipus is a pawn of fate and a hero too. His corresponding need to rise above the negativism (in other words, the struggle of good over evil).

In some cases, the "60 Minutes" team sets out to expose what appears to be an illegal or illicit operation. They take on the role of the righteous hero rushing to the side of the underdog as was recently the case in a segment concerning a health spa where the owners were taking people's money for diagnoses of possible ailments. Needless to say, the vulnerable paid handsomely in order that they may be restored to health. Further, the men operating this 'clinic' were not medical doctors. On a later programme, it was reported that this expose brought a congressional inquiry into the activities of the operators. The viewer was left with the feeling that once more justice has triumphed and harmony in the system has been reinstated.

Although "60 Minutes" is a documentary which attempts, by visual comment, to change aspects of society, the basic tenet of "hero/underdog/bad man" can be found in serialized dramas much the same as they can be found in mythical stories. For example, the story of Oedipus Rex told just such a theme. A young man is predestined by an oracle (the Oracle of Delphi) that he will kill his father, marry his mother, produce children and rule a kingdom. At the time the oracle was made, Oedipus, having been brought up by shepherds, did not even know his father let alone his mother. His life runs its fated course and in the end, having discovered the tragedy of his situation, he plucks out his eyes, is banished from the kingdom and is left to wander the countryside trying to vindicate his sins.

Although this is a very brief summary, it shows that Oedipus is, indeed, a pawn and that what he does is done of necessity. Oedipus becomes the hero in that he realized his deeds and attempts to rectify them; he becomes the underdog because he is being used and cannot control his destiny; he becomes the bad man because, irrespective of the oracle, he can murder. In another interpretation of the same theme, "Kojak" illustrates many of the basic ideas. Kojak, the hero, is able to kill if it is expedient to do so in the protection of society. His method of solving crimes is calculating, suspicious and almost cruel in his relentless pursuit of justice. In this way, he often resorts to the use of the same underhanded tactics as his adversaries. It is interesting to note that his omnipotence is not fully displayed until the end when he finds the necessary clue to make his arrests; until that time it appears as though good will succumb to evil.
It is not too difficult to sketch in a comparison between the seemingly omniscient Kojak and the spirit of myths, and to study them for what they appear to be or in the words of the eminent philosopher, Mircea Eliade, as "great moments in time". Eliade believed that myths, to the ancients, were real events and each time they were repeated they became revelations of reality - they provided reasons for the more profane existences of mankind. One of the greatest condemnations given by rational thinkers to the world of mythology is that myths do not record actual experiences, that they are, indeed imaginings which only serve to clutter up the world of logic and method. Yet, how does one really know which part of existence the myth describes is unreal. A Chinese poet has expressed this aptly: "I dreamt last night that I was a butterfly and now I don't know whether I am a man who dreamt that I was a butterfly or perhaps a butterfly who dreams now that he is a man". This simple little quotation, however poetical it may be, does serve to summarize the ancient plots that are brought to life on a television screen. Without entering into a discussion on perception, it seems reasonable to comment that the 'butterfly' may, indeed, be the quantity that composes the stuff of dreams translated into visual stories. Therefore, it is unreasonable to conclude that television only offers contemporary expressions of life.

If, as some psychologists, notably Carl Jung, would have us believe, people have an affinity to their forefathers through a subconscious understanding of past cultures, then our understanding of ancient tales can be proven. Carl Jung's main contribution to this study was his concept of the "collective unconscious", an area of the mind that combines thoughts and attitudes of past generations and that have somehow become inbred in each succeeding group. This enables modern man to have this affinity with the ancients due to the fact that attitudes do not really change in man's evolution - it is only the language that expresses these attitudes that changes. Thus, television is only a visual representation of what lies within the recesses of this mind.

One of the chief functions, in the study of myths, is to provide a foundation of understanding as to how various aspects of life began in the creative continuum. Hence, there is a necessary introduction of gods, goddesses, heroes, mere mortals and a cast of thousands. The following quotation was written by Richard Ray in his article which discusses the concepts of Eliade's writings and which attempts
to explain this concept of understanding:

They [myths] indicated what a human being essentially is ...as man repeats them he invokes the events which are truly real and brings them into his own existence. (5)

In other words, he is able to transcend time and space and enter those moments which, due to their intensity, help to explain his existence on the more mundane level - the "why" of it all.

Eliade believes that we must go back in time to all former cultures for at least one reason: man can no longer lay claim to originating a myth (or story). In fact, outside of the more superficial pursuits such as fads in fashion, political and economic trends that are here one day and gone the next, and the trend toward pretended religious zeal, man has succeeded in secularizing his life. Apparently, we still have our gods and goddesses but while they were once characters far removed from this life and above the ills borne by ordinary man, we have replaced them with the mind-benders: political leaders such as Karl Marx, television stars, fashion designers, poets, et al. Taylor cites a quotation from the work of the anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss:

The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous...to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. (6)

Although, we know our television stars, for example, are not products of immaculate conception, we nonetheless place them on pedestals. In appearance, money, status and experience, they seem to far surpass the rest of us who confine ourselves (perhaps through a sense of modesty) to the audience. These secular gods and goddesses have license to do what they please much like Zeus who experienced no reprisals after raping Europa, a Phoenician princess of Greek legend.

It would seem that the myth created the sense of reality we have today for even though modern man lives more in the profane expression, much of his existence is based on antiquity - festivals such as New Year's, the birth of a child, the coming of spring, to name a few, all can be traced back to early beginnings. In fact, this is proven every year on television especially at Christmas when every night
there are relentless specials to celebrate some aspect of the holiday. The interesting part of these productions is that all of them, animated or not, carry some sort of moral/ethical message to do with sharing and goodwill - attitudes that abound at that time of year.

New Year's Eve, on television, continues to carry the magic of optimism. This is interesting because according to Eliade, myths to the ancients were neither moral nor ethical. It is modern man who has placed these principles on them. To reiterate, myths were events or happenings that took place constantly. Almost everything was looked upon as having sacred or holy appeal. Thus, they did not have any reason to view what they were doing as being morally valuable. Thus, a knowledge of the historical myth gives a sense of organization to the world, for the things that men do become predictable. Every gesture and function which is based on some myth becomes a ritual, liturgy, etc., and is designed to bring order to a structure-hungry society. Relating this to television, it becomes obvious how much of an impact the medium makes on society. Suffice it to say, that programmes give impressions of the strata of society as well as an idea of how they work.

For example, Kojak not only has a higher god in the form of the Captain but he also has lower gods - in other words, he controls his own pecking order. He moves either way depending on whether he wishes to 'buck' authority or bring the wrath of supremacy to bear on his lesser aides. The viewer receives the impression that under certain circumstances it is acceptable to move contrary to authority while, at the same time, if something goes awry, it is acceptable to blame others for the mistakes.

Another example might be the Fall-of-Man myths, allegories indigenous to all cultures. They illustrate that a return to the knowledge of the Tree of Good and Evil is designed to show man that should he follow certain ideals his return to the godhead will be that much safer and more concrete. The "cops and robbers" programmes display this concept to some extent: the law enforcers act as the 'supreme' beings in bringing, by whatever method, those who have fallen from grace back to the sanctity of goodness. Those who adamantly refuse to conform are punished (likened to sin and guilt). It would appear, then, that man can transcend the distance between himself and the exemplary models of his gods that far surpass his immediate world. In this way, it seems that reality is predestined for, as
each man repeats the myth, he invokes the events which are truly real and brings them into his own existence. By preserving the memory, the sense of time that constitutes a reality remains at a standstill and becomes easily accessible. Thus, each time the television set is turned on, out comes the same plot which only serves to heighten the return to ancient ritual. As a result, the audience participates by becoming like the gods in the quest for truth. In other words, we believe McGarrett of "Hawaii Five-O to be fully justified in capturing the criminal by using any available method. Although he may be using the same underhanded tactics as the criminal, by virtue of his being on the side of goodness, it is all considered to be excusable. This nostalgia for black and white goodness could well be a dominant reason why audiences feel relieved when the criminal is brought swiftly and efficiently to justice.

The myth, then, represents a new beginning each time it is repeated - in a sense it begins history again. One emerges out of his profane existence and re-enters the great times of the sacred. The time factor is important here because by:

reliving a myth one does so in a 'concentrated time' of heightened intensity which makes us live in a time quite other than 'secular duration' or mundane time.(7)

This particular quotation is more than appropriate to describe the heightened sensitivity with which television programmes are viewed. Jerzy Kosinski, in an interview with David Sohn, expresses this claim very well:

TV...influences the way we view the world. On television the world is exciting, single-faceted, never complex. By comparison, their own lives appear slow, uneventful, bewildering. They find it easier to watch televised portrayals of human experiences - violence, love, adventure, sex - than to gain the experience for themselves...Even death is no longer a necessary part of existence for them. Its finality is gone because their hero, no matter how dead, would rise again.(8)

Therefore, the individual accepts his beliefs, not because they are true or untrue but because they are useful in adjusting himself to his social surroundings. Television advertising, for example, works exactly the same way as serialized dramas in providing contrived beliefs and the individual accepts these substitutes because they are
capable to performing the same function as his old ones. Television, then, affords a kind of mechanized yet symbolical brainwashing.

A discussion of myth cannot be adequately done without mentioning the symbolical content. It is generally agreed that symbols stand in lieu of something else; they form a bridge over which meaning can cross. It seems that symbols, as history has shown, have been a way in which men could reduce their unexplainable world to a less complex order of things. Jung says that symbols "represent an attempt to elucidate, by means of analogy, something that still belongs entirely to the domain of the known..." (9). Symbols have been invented to suit the times and conditions under which men live; however, there are some symbols such as fire, light, etc., that seem to stop time and have a universal message. Dancing is another example that can be used: a simple two-partner dance can often represent coitus and one reason why it remains so popular, especially in public, is due to its being a safe expression of the mating syndrome.

Eliade believes that because many symbols are universal in nature, it is the duty of a given society to make them work and to make them become understandable. In other words, they need to be revised for purposes which satisfy an enlightened reason. In relating this to modern plays, one can well see that any kind of revision that has taken place is perhaps for the worse. Old plots have, indeed, been modernized and in so doing, in many cases, the magic has become lost in a morass of heavy, coarse language, different authority figures and obvious destruction and violence.

One does not find much delicate symbolism in a programme such as "Starsky and Hutch" but, rather, raw, very visual violent activity. Greek tragedies were built mainly on exposition and very little physical action. The audiences were probably much more literary with minds that could grasp abstract nuances of speech and symbol. Nowadays, unless we see something taking place, people often find it difficult to use the one facility that crosses time and space: imagination.

Symbols are much like depth-experiences because they are self-involving; they invite participation by incorporating a person into the meaning. Thus, they are a viable method of imparting knowledge. Jung, like Eliade, believed that the myth functioned as a way of capturing and defining
that which appears mysterious. In its rituals and dogmas, myths create unity within a body of people and so it is that these same people share corresponding archetypal models and further, that they search for them. Jung called this, as had been stated already, the collective unconscious. Hence, television provides an excellent medium from which subconscious messages can be obtained and reinforced. If one can understand and accept his own particular expressions of archetypes and combine them with the particular symbology, one begins to transform experiences into acceptable entities.

Thus, "Rafferty", the medical doctor, was an epitomization of what people hoped to see in real-life situation.

Perhaps, at this point, it would be wise to pause and consider what has been claimed. It is the belief of this writer that all modern behaviour patterns are the result of prior understanding. In other words, societies today have gained their knowledge through mental evolution. However, although the advent of electronic media has created more focussed attitudes, it has still not eliminated the basic components that go to comprise plots for scripts and for the acting that brings them to life. Moreover, there appears (due to more immediate exposure) to be a greater need for the forces of good to triumph over evil. Plot after plot, be they a situation-comedy, drama (including some documentaries), television ads which cast at least one or two persons in the role of the imparters of knowledge, are all designed, like the gods of Mount Olympus, to create a better world. For the rest who have either fallen from grace (as in the "cops and robbers") or through plain ignorance of something better (as in the case of television ads) or for those who are victims of circumstance, the public are encouraged to learn by their electronic counterparts to rise above their mundane existences.

Along with this, the media, especially television, cannot rule out the value of visual symbology. Kojak, as cited earlier as an example, symbolizes the all-knowing, macho, ever-sensual, nattily dressed male detective who always gets his man. His masculine virility is portrayed by his sarcastic speech mode, tight-fitting suits and piercing gaze geared to melt his feminine audience. Combined with this, is his kissing of womens' hands (an old world European custom) and his chronic eating of suckers. This is designed to not only bring out the maternal instincts of women but their sexual natures, for the sucker is often a symbol of an oral sexuality. It is not only
women who are affected, but also men who can immediately identify with this portrayal and may easily provoke good-natured chuckles, a "one with the boys" attitude.

To finish these remarks, the programme "Six Million Dollar Man" provides a rich enough myth, or perhaps, a composite sort of myth. The underlying principle of this series is obviously sexual with the political setting a mere backdrop.

Steve Austin has been endowed with godlike capacities for he can out-punch, out-run, out-jump and see farther than mere mortals. His bionic eye is a fine example of the Mystery School all-seeing eye of the Masonic tradition. He is the epitome of the 21st Century man, physically all-powerful and intellectually omniscient. Here we have a dominant male who must be rendered acceptable to both sexes by his very maleness, this being exploited through visual effects, i.e., the tight pants, the fitted body shirts usually open to the thorax and the careful camera angles to play up the firm jaw and the swing of muscular shoulders - all contrived to match every hot-blooded woman's dream.

In myth, Zeus, the leader of all gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus was the only omniscient god but the wise Greeks, in order to create the bond of commonality between themselves and their godly creations, wrote some very human truths into the scripts. Zeus, then, was given jealousy and was made subject to devastating rages. Steve Austin is impotent (or emasculated) if his atomic power-pack gives out. We feel instant concern for him when this happens. We do not want our omnipotent hero to let us down. We say "for God's sake" in the midst of our own troubles, calling on the God of our fathers to save us by miracles. The atomic powerpack simply must not fail us.

In conclusion, Austin, the superman of the 1970's, is enjoying the same powerful success as Clark Kent had twenty years ago, as Zeus had a couple of billenia ago. The public needs its gods. Is television, then, actually filling a mission, that of the spinner of myths without which a laboring society cannot function happily?

The study of ancient tales serves much more than the purpose of historical information. It refines the aesthetic judgment and heightens the understanding of modern-day themes and attitudes. We are not in a position to answer
the question that was raised at the beginning: is myth the expression of all living reality? On television, the stories are told as if these events had actually happened (as Eliade puts it, "great moments in time"). However they are written, the archetypal symbolism, for example, as discussed concerning the attributes of Kojak as well as the so-called realistic events described, are all symbols of the inner experiences of the hero-experiences shared by the viewer through identification. As each time the plot repeats the basic mythical line of "good over evil" we transcendent time and space in our return to the poignancy of ancient ideals. Thus, the writer is compelled to state that without the symbol there is no myth; without the original story or allegory there is no creative thinking and without creative thinking, television would never have become the arresting medium of expression that it so obviously is today.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 163.
3. Eliade, Mircea. An expression Eliade uses throughout his writings to describe the vital essence of reality which manifests itself in particular moments that are remembered and repeated from generation to generation.
10. Ibid., p. 18.

BIBLIOGRAPHY