

Psychoanalysis and pop culture: myths in the contemporary era

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Abstract: What does pop culture have to say about the subjects of our time? In this article, the authors propose a way of reading the productions of pop culture betting that, in the contemporaneity, it flourishes, in the territory traditionally reserved for mythology, as enunciator of the modes of subjectivation. In the psychoanalytic approach of myths from Freud and Lacan, the function of covering the Real of the helplessness, in a rationalist era, is played by fictions that leave traces and make it possible, through variance and repetition, to unveil the underlying structure that engenders them. Finally, it is proposed that if these productions are consumed with such voracity, it is because they say something about the subjects who are targeted – that is, about the subjectivity of this time.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, pop culture, myths.

Introduction

By the time the initial lines of this article were developed, in December 2015, news media had reported that *The Force Awakens*, one of the latest episodes of the *Star Wars* franchise, surpassed worldwide revenue of US\$ 1.000.000.000 with less than a month after release (to be exact, it only took twelve days) (Abrams, 2015). At the movie premiere, thousands of people gathered in movie theaters around the globe dressed as the characters in the universe created by George Lucas – who, incidentally, is not alone in the billion-dollar income productions club: 23 films star in the group led by *Avatar*, James Cameron (2009)¹. It is an undeniably recent phenomenon; in this group, only three members were produced before the turn of the 21st century and almost all of them settled in a territory still very little explored by psychoanalysis: *pop culture*. Although total number of viewers are not as easy to calculate, box office data show that at the turn of the 21st century, film reach achieved levels the Lumière brothers could never dream of.

This brief exposes the conditions under which this article was elaborated: it was instigated by an expressive and intriguing social phenomenon, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, crossed by research involving contemporary cinema that, incidentally, also deals with the pop culture – as depending on the scope, it becomes virtually impossible to decouple one from the other. The mention of *Star Wars* is not accidental: the first film, in 1977, established a turning point, with movies becoming toys, comics, books, video games, television advertisements, action figures and all sorts of derivatives that the industry can imagine, instituting the phenomenon

that today is recognized by the title of transmedia (Lucas, 1977). Because of their power, cinema and pop culture – with the masses they mobilize, the images they offer, and the constellations of signifiers that set them in motion – are not something we can neglect as we look at the constitution of the contemporary subject. Hence the question that drives this article: what do contemporary cultural productions, especially cinematographic works, have to say about the subjects of our time? Our bet is that, in contemporary times, pop culture springs from the soil traditionally reserved for mythology as an enunciator of subjectivation. As a propeller of this discussion, it will be important to recapitulate the place that psychoanalysis reserves for myths and pop culture.

Myths and psychoanalysis

The study of myths goes much further than the emergence of psychoanalysis and is too broad to be synthesized in this article. From its scope, what interests us is to make a cut-off that places its approaches in relation to the psychoanalytic discourse. We begin with the etymology of the term myth offered by Jassanan Pastore (2012, p. 20):

The word myth has its Greek origin in *mythos*, which derives from the verb *mytheio*, to tell, to narrate, and *mytheo*, to count, to talk to. In archaic Greece, mid-8th to 6th century a. C., the primordial sense of the term *mythos* was word or speech, attached to a narrative linked to the gods and heroes. In Greek literature, *mythos* arises with the sense of history or narrative being conveyed through the word. The narrator, a poet/*aedo* chosen by the gods, has the sacred word, because it comes from a divine revelation and it is therefore taken as truth.

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¹ Data extracted from Box Office Mojo, April 2016. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/RmU48c>

Freud made extensive use of mythical narratives in his theoretical elaboration. Whether they were drawn from Greek tragedies, Polynesian customs, Jewish scriptures, or Christian demonology, the instigator of the analytical discourse gave them reasonably uniform treatment, using them to illustrate, sustain, and expand their clinical findings. Freud's hypothesis (1908/2006d), enunciated in *Creative Writers and Day-dreaming*, is that myths would constitute "distorted vestiges of fantasies full of desires of entire nations, the secular dreams of young humanity" (p. 242). When the myths he had at his disposal seemed insufficient to him, the founder of psychoanalysis proposed new narratives: in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913/2006e), he predominantly emphasized the phenomenology of rites and prohibitions of primitive societies to develop the hypothesis of the primal horde; in *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939/2006f), Freud took into account Egyptian and Jewish narratives, in order to compose a *historical truth* about the murder of a religious leader. Both versions of an original parricide (the first as founder of civilization, the second as organizer of monotheism) are treated by Freud as a historical reality. Lacan (1969-1970/1992), on *The other side of psychoanalysis*, is particularly critical of Freudian propositions. To the French psychoanalyst, Freud's insistence that the murder of the father of the horde as well as the murder of Moses would be historical facts seems uncomfortable. Would it be too generous of us to relativize Lacanian acidity and to propose that in both cases it was a matter of establishing a construction which sought to shed light on the repression of culture?

A reader of Freud, Lévi-Strauss used myths in the fulcrum of his theoretical elaboration. Instead of seeking an original or authentic version of the myth, Lévi-Strauss supported the structural analysis of the myth, that is, the consideration of all variants of the myth in the same measure, observing the repetitions that reveal its internal framework. In *Myth and Meaning*, Lévi-Strauss (1978) sees the character of helplessness present in the myth, noting that it offers the illusion that humans can understand the universe and, more than that, that they really understand it. Although to the anthropologist such an illusion is extremely important, it fails to give man greater dominion over nature – thus differing from the success of scientific thought. While masterfully describing the characteristics, functions, and structure of myths, Lévi-Strauss avoided circumscribing them into an operational definition – a more prudent choice than that made by Albino Magno, who, in the initial lines of the volume addressed to his students, states:

The name mythology is given to the fables or erroneous beliefs that formed the basis of the religion of the Greeks and the Romans and of all the other peoples of the earth, except for the Jews. The worship of false gods, the worship of idols, is called idolatry or paganism. (s/d, p. 7)

Refraining from producing an ethnocentric conceptualization about a cultural phenomenon is a never-ending challenge; otherwise, we would have to question ourselves: is every form of understanding of the world that distances itself from modern Western reasoning a myth? Or does Western reasoning itself have a mythic structure? Let's put this question on hold for now.

The Romanian mythologist Mircea Eliade (1972), while recognizing the difficulties of delimiting his research object, proposed that "the myth tells a sacred story; it tells about an event occurring in primordial time" (p. 9), in which something was brought into existence by the intervention of the supernatural. Eliade points out that it is always about a "true" story – "false" stories, like fables and vulgar tales, would not fit into myth. The distinction between true and false narratives is, however, a methodological setback; the accounts transmitted under the sign of truth by one group may be perceived as false by another. Eliade points out that the transmission rite plays a key role in this differentiation – true stories would not be unceremonious in their counting, while false stories are reported on a daily basis, without observing the rigors that would be fit to genuine myths.

Preserving Eliade's idea that myths provide models for human activities, valuation and significance to existence, Junito de Souza Brandão (1986) offers an interesting way out: "myths are the imagistic language of principles . . . a collective representation, transmitted through several generations and which reports an explanation of the world" (p. 38). Enthusiastic about Jung's formulations, Brandão observes in the myths an inexhaustible repository of symbols that would allow access to the "conscious to the collective unconscious", and was particularly interested in myths that would fit this description.

Roland Barthes brings a more comprehensive and flexible concept, which Brandão only partially agrees with: myths act fundamentally as a system of communication. "This is why it could not be an object, a concept or an idea: it is a mode of signification, a form", says Barthes (2009, pp. 297-298). Brandão's disagreement lies in what he considers a *reduction of the concept of myth* in Barthes, which would present it as any substitutable form of truth. If myth is a speech, everything can be a myth: "every object in the world can move from a closed, mute existence to an oral state, open to the appropriation of society, for no law, natural or not, can prevent us from talking about things", Barthes (2009, p. 298) provokes.

The work of Jacques Lacan helps us to situate the question of myth within the psychoanalytic field. Lacan (1956-1957/1995), who, unlike Freud, had access to the contributions of Lévi-Strauss, emphasized myth's linguistic aspects: "what is called a myth, be it religious or folkloric, at any stage of its legacy is represented as a narrative" (p. 258), with the myth entailing a character of fiction – even if it is a stable fiction, not easily bent to individual flavors. It is, therefore, a *collective fiction*

that, however, has singular effects in each subject. In the seminar *The other side of psychoanalysis*, Lacan (1969-1970/1992) synthesizes the meaning of myth as a *statement of the impossible*. Which impossible is that? The impossible reduction of the Real to the Symbolic and the Imaginary. This conclusion arises when we consider that Lacan (1956-1957/1995), at an earlier time, emphasized that the mythical category refers to the relation of man “to the existence of the subject himself and to the horizons that his experience brings him” (p. 259), existence whose genesis is permanently seen as an enigma. It would not be for another reason, moreover, that so often the myths dwell on issues of creation, in order to account for an *originating scene*. We could, based on the lightness of Barthes and the formulations of Lacan, take myths as *collective fictions that cover the Real of helplessness*. In this sense, analysis of myths reveals the grammar of helplessness inherent in the modality of subjectivation in which it is inscribed. In other words, it is possible to draw clinical consequences from mythological examination. Maria Rita Kehl’s contribution below (2002, pp. 68-69) helps consolidate this concept:

If helplessness is part of the human condition, great formations of culture work to provide, in a world made of language, some reasonably solid structures of support for these beings by definition straying from the order of nature. Tradition, in a way, situates people in the society in which they live, explaining what is expected of each one from the place they occupy from birth. Religion produces meaning for life and death, and guides moral choices; the myths explain why things are as they are, and set necessary prohibitions to maintain the social bond.

On the one hand, Mythology, as an imagistic language, condenses the symbolic arrangements of culture; on the other hand, it places the frames of the imagination on the other. For Lacan (1954/2008), myths lie at the heart of analytic experience. Proposed thusly by the French psychoanalyst:

If we focus on the definition of myth as a certain objective representation of an epos or a *gestate* that expresses in an imaginary way the fundamental relations characteristic of a certain human being in a given period, if we understand it as the latent or patent social manifestation, virtual or conducted, full or emptied of its meaning, we can then certainly find its function in the experience of the neurotic. (p. 10)

In describing the structure of the myth, we see that Lacan brings himself closer to the Freudian notion of a family romance: he can be *historicized* – insofar as he allows himself to be converted into a narrative referred to another temporality – and *hystericized* – insofar as the subject can create himself in this narrative by questioning

the Other about himself. Could this Lacan’s intention (1954/2008) when he proposes the expression “individual myth of the neurotic”?

Whether or not a myth is credible, whether it harmonizes or conflicts with the notion of reality, these may be secondary inquiries. Lacan (1969-1970/1992) has argued that one can talk a lot of nonsense about myths, because myths are the field of stupidity – and therein lies the truth. In *Atlas*, Borges (2010) brings us the image of a colloquy between two Greeks: “The theme of dialogue is abstract. They sometimes refer to myths, which both disbelieve. . . . They agree on a single point; they know that it’s impossible for the discussion to arrive at a truth” (p. 37). The Hellenes imagined by Borges, inserted in a fertile universe of mythology, allowed themselves to be placed at a critical distance, but still return to myths to look for the truth that they supposed they could decant from themselves. Similar to Lacan’s (1974-1975/2002) position at the *R. S. I.* seminar, when, noting that a negated truth (*Verneinung*) has as much weight as an affirmed truth (*Bejahung*), pointing out that the imagination is where all truth is enunciated. In addition, a few years before, Lacan (1969-1970/1992) had proposed that “the semi-saying is the internal law of every kind of enunciation of truth, and the myth best embodies it” (p. 103). Thus, the imaginary character of myths, impregnated with the symbolizations that so intrigued Freud, provides material to distribute narratives that will allow them to be deconstructed and *découpage*d, revealing the configuration of helplessness that underlies them. Wouldn’t myths be, then, a form of confession of truth under the structure of fiction that is characteristic of it?

If, as Lacan (1953/1998) points out in *Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, “what we teach the subject to recognize as their unconscious is their history” (p. 263), we cannot ignore the fact that this history is stuffed by other histories. In the same text, shortly before pointing out that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, Lacan postulates that the unconscious is “the chapter of my story that is marked by a blank or occupied by my lie: it is the censored chapter” (p. 260). But the truth can be redeemed; most of the time, it is already written elsewhere. What other places would these be? Lacan names them: they are the *monuments* (the body, eyewitness of existence); the *archived documents* (the childhood memories in their semi-impenetrability character); *semantic evolution* (the particular lexicon and the mannerisms that were appropriate); the *vestiges* (evidences of distortions perceived at the level of speech); and *traditions* – described as the “legends that in heroic form convey my history” (p. 261). The French psychoanalyst thus points out that a part of the unconscious is preserved in great shared narratives – in *epos*, epic poems, and in *gesta*, heroic deeds; in other words, in the mythical formulations – which command subjectivation.

Let us then take myths as a construction, in the Freudian sense of the term, which, as Lacan (1974/1993)

points out, try to reveal what is operating at the level of the unconscious structure. Myths work, therefore, as an enunciator of what happens behind the scenes, to use the metaphor of Ana Vicentini de Azevedo (2004). However, the author warns that mythological content should not be interpreted as an archetype (that is, as if it bears a crystallized and uniform sense), since myths themselves are defined by the multiplicity of meanings: the relations between the signifiers present in the myth, both in its intratextuality and in its intertextuality, that reveal the fabric that constitutes it. As Lévi-Strauss (2008) stresses, “the substance of the myth is found neither in style nor in narration, nor in syntax, but in the story that is told in it” (p. 225). This story, as we have seen, glides over the fabric of culture toward other narratives and replaces a textuality of another order. The word, in its significant dimension, gains emphasis in the interpretation of myths. “Put it in other words, the myth places language in the scene of the word, which is much of what psychoanalysis will later explain, from the logic of the unconscious, both in its theory and in its clinical practice”, Azevedo states (2004, p. 19). The relation between the mythical constructions and the logic of the unconscious, structured as language, is thus placed, insofar as the myth becomes metonymy and metaphor, thus calling for interpretation.

Approaching pop culture

So far, a number of terms have been evoked indistinctly – folklore, tradition, legend – to designate quite specific and possibly heterogeneous modalities of fiction. These narrative forms interest us as they constitute clues and convergences to approach pop culture, a concept of delicate circumscription. The term itself is captious: the pop contraction suggests that the phenomenon belongs to the level of the *popular*, but this equivalence needs to be questioned. In the same way that MPB, an acronym for *Brazilian popular music*, today encompasses a niche that is significantly removed from what could be understood as *popular music in Brazil*, speaking of *pop culture* is not the same as talking about *popular culture*, but this last notion will be useful for the analysis.

The current pop culture was not, obviously, analyzed by Freud – which does not mean that we cannot find guidance in his works. Although Freud has privileged notably scholarly productions in his writings, such as the Hellenistic narratives (recall Oedipus, Narcissus, Plato’s *Banquet* – 428-347 a.C./2016) and Renaissance exponents (let us see the attention devoted to Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo), he also examined a popular novel like *Gradiva*, by Wilhelm Jensen. In some respects, it is possible to see the relationship between Freud’s commentary on Jensen’s book and *Dreams in Folklore*, written in 1911, in partnership with David Oppenheim, but only published in 1957: both texts deal with dream stories obtained outside of a clinical scene, evidencing the possibility of interpreting cultural processes in a

similar way to that introduced in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900/2006a, 1900/2006b). If in *Delusion and Dream*, Freud (1907/2006c) affirms the feasibility of illustrating the analytical method using an artificial dream, in the text of 1911, the emphasis falls on the oneiric scope captured by Oppenheim together with the traditions of the community. Freud’s opinion is categorical: “folklore interprets the oneiric symbols in the same way as psychoanalysis” (Freud & Oppenheim, 1957/2006, p. 220). That is, the founder of analytic discourse took popular culture – folk lore, the knowledge of the people – as an aspect of interpretation of the psyche, a recognition similar to that given to writers and art in general. It leads the way for one to use the method of dream interpretation in the analysis of the fictions produced by the culture – a set where myths are inserted.

Traditionally, culture is presented by the antithetical pair “high culture” (or elite culture) and “low culture” (or popular culture). Peter Burke (2010), for example, faced with the difficulty of circumscribing his object of study – popular culture – chooses to define it through its negative: an unofficial culture, the culture of the non-elite. In the contemporary world, however, the boundaries become less clear; Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy (2011) point out the erosion of the barriers that distinguished high culture from low culture, as brought on by media and mercantile articulation in the cultural industry that operates at the global level². “For the first time there is a culture no longer produced for a social and intellectual elite, but for everyone, without frontiers of countries or classes” (p. 71). Connected to the intensity of consumer routines, the effect is a *commodification of culture* – and, simultaneously, a *culturalization of the commodity*.

A revolution has been produced: while art henceforth aligns itself with the rules of the mercantile and media world, information technologies, cultural industries, brands, and capitalism itself construct a culture, this is a system of values, goals and myths. (p. 10)

Also, Jameson (1995) looks at the problematic dichotomy between “high culture” and mass culture – hardly sustainable from a historical perspective, since they make up a dialectic of interdependence in which today’s scholar may be the vulgar one of yesterday. The author postulates that in the mass culture, resulting from capitalism’s advance, there is very little that can be recognized as *popular culture* except under “very specific and marginalized” conditions. In that sense, we can agree that in what remains of the *popular, folk* is phagocytosed by pop, losing its distinctive locations

2 We would also need to find out whether this process is indeed global and whether cultural products are transiting globally or in a colonial relationship. In Brazil, pop culture, for example, possesses very strong features of Americanization, although it is possible to find here and there references to Latin or Japanese cultures, possibly tributary to certain television stations. This important question, however, goes beyond the ambitions of this article.

to be replaced by commercial reproducibility – thereby expanding its capacity for penetration into cultural strata: “the *pop* play, through repetition, becomes insensibly part of the existential fabric of our own lives, in such a way that what we hear is ourselves”, says Jameson (1995, p. 20).

The concept of mass culture also assists in formulating the notion of pop culture, although not to be confused with it. Mass culture is described by Lipovetsky (2009) as a “formidable machine governed by the law of accelerated renewal, of ephemeral success, of seduction, of marginal difference” (p. 238). As an effect of the market’s influence on mass compositions, Lipovetsky emphasizes its character of impermanence³. For this reason, the philosopher assumes that mass culture is “a culture without trace, without future, without substantial subjective prolongation” (p. 244). Curiously, however, most of the productions mentioned by the author in this distant year of 1987 – like *James Bond* (Glen, 1987), *Star Trek* (Roddenberry, 1987-1994) and *Superman* (Gupta, 1987) – follow drives in the contemporaneity: in the last decade, the British secret agent starred four films, the new crew of the Enterprise reached the screens on two occasions (and there is another film in production) and the last son of Krypton was interpreted by two different actors in three distinct productions. If mass culture is evanescent, pop culture seems to create points of resistance. It should be recognized, however, that Lipovetsky emphasizes cinema in relation to other cultural industries by the increased durability of its products, as opposed to the programmed obsolescence of albums and books. Our position, then, is that pop culture does leave traces – and its subjective effects are far from negligible.

A scene from the French film *Intouchables* portrays this phenomenon with great acuity: at the birthday celebration of Phillipe, a quadriplegic millionaire, there is a chamber orchestra, hired to entertain guests (Nakache & Toledano, 2011). Among the house’s employees, Driss emphasizes that little importance is given to the private concert, preferring the sound of bands like Earth, Wind and Fire. Phillipe tries to introduce Driss to erudite music and asks the orchestra to perform some classics. On hearing the chords of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee”, Driss expresses a broad smile.

‘Do you know this one?’, Phillipe asks.

‘Sure!’, Driss answers. ‘It’s from *Tom & Jerry!*’

Obviously, Driss’s comic response is naive. More than being a mistake, it is a provocation, a twist, as if to say: *this type of culture is also my culture, I can also enjoy it and it is also part of my story, even if my trajectory goes through the suburbs of Paris and not through its*

3 In his reflection, Lipovetsky (2009) creates the possibility of a dialogue with psychoanalysis: “like dreams and sayings, mass culture essentially has repercussions here and now” (p. 244). Psychoanalysts, however, are well aware of the temporal dilation of the reverberations of the unconscious, which extend far beyond the “here and now” – they affect both the construction of the future and the resignification of the past.

art galleries. And perhaps the condition of possibility of this democratization of access – and of the very constitution of the field of pop culture – passes through the commodification of culture. Above value judgments on a possible barbarism and inauthenticity of mass culture – especially from the Frankfurt school theoreticians, who did not escape Jameson, Lipovetsky and Serroy –, we must remember that the effects of the market on culture in certain aspects made it available to population levels that otherwise would be completely unaware.

We use the reference to popular culture and mass culture to propose pop culture as a third margin, not necessarily located in productions of high prestige and undeniable aesthetic recognition, nor exactly situated at the level of the ordinary or vulgar. Pop culture is not sold for millions of dollars at Sotheby’s auctions, nor does it require the highest scholarship to appreciate its aesthetic value. Ultimately, it is not restricted to acting as an intermediary between art and capital, between the noble and the populace, between the learned and the uneducated; it dismantles these boundaries at the same time as it constitutes an unprecedented territory that speaks to many subjects indiscriminately. An important notion of pop culture is written by Thiago Soares (2014, p. 140):

We attribute pop culture, to the set of practices, experiences and products guided by media logic, whose origin is entertainment; it is situated, mainly, from means of production connected to culture industries (music, cinema, television, editorial, among others) and it establishes forms of enjoyment and consumption that permeate a certain sense of community, the act of belonging or the sharing of affinities which situate individuals within a transnational and globalizing sense.

By establishing the notion of pop culture not only from the products that reside there, but also – and especially – in relation to the practices and experiences that are inscribed or derived from pop territory, Soares emphasizes that the subjects crossed by it are not just consumers: they are interpreters. This understanding helps dismantle an illusion of consumer passivity from pop culture to its commodities. If pop culture develops as a consequence of the commodification of culture, it will also manifest the tension of that brand within its own objects. In this sense, the aesthetic of pop deserves to be recognized as a way of existing and resisting the injunctions and contradictions of late capitalism. See *Deadpool*, for example: a superhero movie that, oscillating between self-deprecating humor and satire, makes fun of superheroes, the way Hollywood conceives superheroes, and the way the public reveres superheroes (Miller, 2016). The film works only because it absorbs and returns to the viewer the consumer paradox of which both are a consequence of – while presenting a sufficiently original aesthetic experience.

Thus, pop culture comprises a mobile, transnational, self-referential, multiform area in its media constitution, with intergenerational traces and whose consumption is not confined to a single social stratum. Conceived in a radical interactivity between public and work, pop culture itself is marked by its *indeterminacy* – it is unfeasible to reduce it to its works or to determine it from them by the fact that the very productions that generate it have a mobile status: they can be replaced by new ones, abandoned or, worse, forgotten. That is why the definition of pop culture is so thorny: when one tries to circumscribe it, it is no longer there – although we may, *a posteriori*, identify its traces. This field is presented as a *littoral*, evoking the Lacanian concept that Edson Sousa (2006), with great subtlety, defines as “a meeting between heterogeneous parts” (p. 49) – but a voracious, arrogant and wild coastline, permanently updating itself, which produces and devours icons, which builds and buries representations, irreducibly contemporary, that dialogues with *scholar, cult, mainstream, geek and trash*. We understand that it is from this littoral condition, condensation of *littoral* and *literary*, that pop culture assumes, in the contemporary world, a part of the function previously reserved for mythical narratives.

Pop culture and myths in contemporary times

Here, then, is the point that we would like to stress in this writing: what, after all, is our mythology today? What stories shape the fabric of our time and express the formations of the unconscious? What are the narratives that constitute us as subjects in the contemporary? Clinical experience suggests some significant transformations over the previous decades. In the wake of recent capitalism, local legends were almost completely replaced by global fictions. The children of present-day Brazil may not know beings like *caipora* or *curupira*, but they all know who Batman and Spider-Man are. Adults share reasonably similar representations of what a zombie would be, surely closer to the image proposed by George Romero’s films than the Voodoo tradition, from which that figure first appeared. The most widely circulated versions of Hans Christian Andersen’s short stories are not from Hans Christian Andersen; they are from Disney. The Roman deities, outside their pantheon, continue governing destiny from the horoscope section. And the turbulent relations of *Star Wars* kinship – an admitted quilt composed of fragments of samurai, western, medieval fantasy and science fiction – are decidedly more famous than those of The Theban Trilogy.

Mircea Eliade (1972) postulates that, in modern societies, narrative prose has taken its place in traditional societies by reciting myths, and defends the possibility of dissecting the mythic structure present in some novels – similar to *comics*, American comic books, whose characters, according to the author, “present the modern version of mythological or folklore heroes” (p. 129). Eliade is not insensitive to the expressive mobilization of the readers

about changes in the conception of the characters – changes generally related to thorny subjects, such as sexuality and death. If we follow the *comic* books of the day, such a remark will not surprise us: both Marvel and DC, the two largest comic book publishers in the United States, developed arcs in which profound transformations occurred to the characters, never without reverberations within their clientele. We were amazed to realize that Eliade had detected the magnitude of these editorial interventions as early as 1962, a time when readers’ communication with publishers was through letters and phone calls. Since then, Spider-Man’s uniform has been taken over by a black character, Thor has changed his gender and Superman, the zenith of Western heroism, has died (but of course he has recovered). And all these characters have gained quite solid film versions. Expanding to the cinema, the comic book world has attempted, in its own way, to keep pace with changes in society (with greater conservatism on DC’s part than Marvel, one must acknowledge). Agreeing that it responds to a mythical function, it is easy to understand the reasons for protest when modifications are implemented – because, as Diana Corso and Mário Corso (2011) point out, “fiction is not only a form of fun, it is also the vehicle through which an imaginary canon, used to elaborate some aspect of our subjectivity or social reality, can be established” (p. 24). And psychoanalysts are familiar with what commitment the subjects preserve their defense strategies against helplessness, however unstable, anachronistic or ill-founded they are.

We believe ourselves to be rationalists, as Mário Corso (2004) observes. Late modernity, in general, encapsulated scientism, technicalism and reason as the premise and goal of its project of humanity. In other words, we assume we are (or wish to be) free from the evil influences of magical thinking, religious dogmatism, superstition, and belief. But, as the author recalls, the time of the myth is not over. We continue to be told by fictions that constitute us, although the character of these narratives is hopelessly crossed by modern rationality, which despises everything that does not follow its own standards of truth. “At every moment, the media manufacture a generation of monsters (especially for the young audience) that are consumed to exhaustion and then discarded”, Corso (2004, p. 14) recalls. But even in what is discarded – and perhaps especially in them – we can find certain constancies, common points, repetitions of form and content. It is enough to recall Levi-Strauss’ observation on the function of repetition in myths, which operates in the unveiling of its structure, so that the value of recapitulation and dispersion can be reinvigorated in the interpretation of these narratives. It would be possible to deduce that in the exercise of retelling the same story over and over again, through *remakes, prequels, sequences, reboots and spin-offs*, the film industry incurs a repetition automatism, capitulating to creative exhaustion and appealing to beaten formulas to keep their coffers lined. It is necessary to consider, however, that the fascination exerted by these retellings is precisely due to the fact that repetition expresses an

attribute of myth – not only an addiction resulting from the commodification of culture. As the myth defined by the “set of all its versions”, as Lévi-Strauss (2008, p. 233) proposes, each retake of the narrative, each update, makes the structure on which the narrative rests more visible, allowing us to glimpse to what extent the variations of the narrative clutch the Achilles heel of culture.

To consider that we are crossed by mythical narratives that inhabit pop culture implies, recognizing its character of entertainment, treating it with seriousness. Just as mythological examination is conducive to clinical developments, to look at pop culture and its productions may offer some keys to understanding contemporary malaise configurations, especially if we consider that the fictions of culture are forms of resistance to injunctions of daily life. The great fictional narratives, whether they are *true or false stories*, in Eliade’s terms, carry a structure that makes them bearers of knowledge about the subjects – a veiled knowledge that requires the interpreter’s operation to come to the surface. It would be important to problematize the psychic consequences of the displacement of subjectivist narratives from the mythological field to the terrain of pop culture: that effects on the constitution of the subject produces the projection of the cultural industry as Other, that forms of malaise present themselves from the repositioning of the tradition – no longer as a treasure of the ancients, but as a code of the contemporaries – which, in the face of the Real, the productions of pop culture propose to conceal, and so on. As Birman (2012) points out, “there is no longer any doubt about the changes in the forms of malaise in the contemporary world, in contrast to what the Freudian discourse sharply described. The picture today is different, starkly different” (p. 63). We are entirely in agreement and if the present scenario has specifics in relation to the panorama explored by Freud, it is up to us to question the modulations in the discourse of the Other that rediscover the desires, the ideals and the helplessness of our time – and, consequently, affect the clinical field, leading us to question the diagnostic categories themselves that support analytical practice.

Regarding this aspect, however, this writing has few answers to offer; we are content, for now, to present a *method*. In short, what we have here is the possibility of examining the manifestations of pop culture, and more

specifically the film productions that are inscribed in it, in their mythical aspect, as collective narratives that signify and articulate helplessness under the slogan of fiction, interpreting them in the way that Freud analyzed oneiric compositions. In other words, analyze the movies as myths and interpret them as dreams. For in the end, perhaps, mythical allegories derive from the same processes of deformation that affect dreams. As proposed by Christian Dunker and Ana Lucilia Rodrigues (2015, p. 15):

If movies are our myths and if the psychoanalyst is a kind of modern shaman, interpreter, translator and articulator of the individual myths of neurotics, we are on the level of commensurability between different fictional systems and their possible symbolic obstructions. In this sense, psychoanalysis can interpret cinema with eventual gains and losses for both sides. In this aspect, cinema is especially sensitive to capture and name the grammar of social suffering, previously indicating the forms of symptoms and narrative supports which the clinic will use.

To work like this represents a rescue of pop culture in relation to the condition of deject of the culture that is usually attributed to it in the most prestigious means. This, in a way, is a faithfully Freudian enterprise: the founder of psychoanalysis used as the raw material the rejects of scientific thought of his time, such as dreams, slips of the tongue and so called Witz, and gave them a high degree of composition of his theory. It is Freud himself (1908/2006d) who stresses the pertinence of listening to the everyday life of culture by choosing, in his examination of the poet and the fantasist, not the authors who are “most applauded by critics, but the less pretentious novelists, novels and short stories, which, however, enjoy the esteem of a wide circle of readers of both sexes” (p. 139). Perhaps Freud shared the hypothesis that if these productions are consumed with such voracity, it is because they say something about the subjects who read them. If mythical narratives of the contemporary dwell in pop culture – and in particular in the cinema –, there is something there that interests psychoanalysis and which, following Lacan’s (1953/1998) recommendation, allows us to maintain the subjectivity of our time in the horizon of our work.

Psicanálise e cultura pop: os mitos no contemporâneo

Resumo: O que a cultura pop tem a dizer sobre os sujeitos de nosso tempo? Neste ensaio, os autores propõem uma via de leitura das produções da cultura pop apostando que, na contemporaneidade, ela floresce, no território tradicionalmente reservado à mitologia, como enunciante dos modos de subjetivação. Retomando a abordagem psicanalítica dos mitos a partir de Freud e Lacan, observa-se que a função de recobrir o Real do desamparo, em um tempo que se crê racionalista, passa a ser desempenhada por ficções que deixam rastros e possibilitam, através da variância e da repetição, desvelar a estrutura subjacente que lhes engendra. Por fim, propõe-se que, se essas produções são consumidas com tamanha voracidade, é porque dizem algo sobre os sujeitos que a elas se lançam – ou seja, sobre a subjetividade desta época.

Palavras-chave: psicanálise, cultura pop, mitos.

Psychanalyse et culture pop : les mythes dans la contemporanéité

Résumé : Qu'est-ce que la culture pop peut dire sur les sujets de notre temps ? Dans cet essai, les auteurs proposent une voie de lecture des productions de la culture pop en pariant que, dans la contemporanéité, elle fleurit dans le territoire traditionnellement réservé à la mythologie comme énonciateur des modes de subjectivation. Si l'on reprend l'approche psychanalytique sur les mythes à partir de Freud et Lacan, on observe que la fonction de recouvrir le Réel de la détresse, dans un temps qu'on croit rationaliste, est accomplie par des fictions qui laissent des traces et permettent, grâce à la variance et à la répétition, de révéler la structure sous-jacente qui les engendre. Enfin, on propose que, si ces productions sont consommées avec une telle voracité, c'est parce qu'elles disent quelque chose sur les sujets qui sur elles se lancent – c'est-à-dire sur la subjectivité d'une époque.

Mots-clés : psychanalyse, culture pop, mythes.

El psicoanálisis y la cultura pop: los mitos en la contemporaneidad

Resumen: ¿Qué tiene que decir la cultura pop sobre los sujetos de nuestro tiempo? En este ensayo, los autores proponen una vía de lectura de las producciones de la cultura pop asumiendo que, hoy en día, ella florece, en el territorio reservado tradicionalmente a la mitología, como enunciante de los modos de subjetivación. Al reanudar el enfoque psicoanalítico de los mitos de Freud y Lacan, se observa que la función de recubrir lo real del desamparo, en un tiempo que se cree racionalista, pasa a ser desempeñada por ficciones que dejan huellas y hacen posible, a través de la varianza y la repetición, develar la estructura subyacente que las engendra. Por último, se propone que, si estas producciones se consumen con tanta voracidad, es porque dicen algo sobre los sujetos que a ellas se arrojan, es decir, sobre la subjetividad de esta época.

Palabras clave: psicoanálisis; cultura pop; mitos.

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