Encyclopedia of Religion and Film

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Further Reading


Myth

Myth may be defined broadly as any type of culturally transmitted narrative or story. Such narratives give people a sense of communal identity, often imparting implicit models that people follow in their day-to-day lives. In the field of religion, myth has a more specific definition; a culturally transmitted and constituted narrative about superhuman characters, often set in a time or place far from our own. The modifier superhuman is a term used to suggest characters who possess qualities, abilities, and attributes well beyond the qualities, abilities, and attributes of normal human beings. Thus the term supernatural has also been used to qualify mythological characters.

In modern societies, film has become the predominant vehicle for myth making in the sense that films often give us a collective sense of who we are, helping to define modern identities in terms of what is fashionable and what is in the public discourse—for example, in films such as *Easy Rider* (1968) or *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Different films may circulate among cultural groups and subcultures, defining common values within them, and helping these communities to imagine themselves.

The almost ritual act of going to the movies, the experience of film—including the suspension of disbelief involved and the immersion into the world of the narrative—all closely resemble the process of inculcating mythology in traditional societies. This process is typified in films that achieve “cult status,” when the stories within films become memorized and transmitted throughout culture; for example,
The Big Lebowski (1998); *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975); and the *Matrix* trilogy (*The Matrix* [1999], *The Matrix Reloaded* [2003], *The Matrix Revolutions* [2003]). Films like these become embedded in the fabric of culture itself, as exemplified in merchandizing and “buzz.”

Films often promulgate the myths at the center of modern culture. For example, American myths that espouse extreme forms of capitalism and excess are promulgated in the “culture industry” in Hollywood, where the “stars” of film and television are subject to a cult of personality, coming to resemble the superhuman agents of traditional myth. This process is exemplified by the rituals and myths surrounding the figure of Elvis Presley. Indeed, since fame is constituted mainly through the circulation of images and stories about someone, gods can be understood to have been among the first to become famous in human societies. Tabloid celebrities in America, like royalty elsewhere, border on the superhuman. Their extreme wealth and notoriety allow them to do things other people cannot do—or at least this is the image that must be projected to maintain the myths about them.

Aside from the notion that film is modern myth, the relation between myth and film is significant primarily in two other ways. First, film narrative often follows the themes and structures of myth. Second, films have been created that tell precisely the same story as those of religious myths.

Both film and myth are “good to think with.” That is, myths must be transmitted from one generation to the next, so they must be remembered and maintained. This has led scholars of religion to conclude that most myths follow basic mnemonic themes and patterns, many of which arose in the context of archaic humans’ interaction with their environment but continue to engage us intellectually as transformations of these elemental experiences. As cultural productions, films engage these elemental psychological and social patterns at the heart of myth. Their ability to access mythical elements is part of what gives them their psychological potency.

Myths express the basic conflicts and preoccupations of the human condition. As material culture changes over time, the human mind stays relatively the same;
our conceptual resources attempt to resolve the paradoxes these changes present to us by artfully playing with the problems and associations that arise because of them. Thus many regard the opposition between nature and culture to lie at the heart of myth, expressed in the Tarzan character in *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984) and the documentary *Baraka* (1992).

Films may be compared to myth with regard to *theme*, a broad category concerning the basic psychological elements of the narrative, or *pattern*, the structure of the narrative itself. Examples of mythic themes in film include, among many others, human interaction with plants and animals in films such as *King Kong* (1933; 1976; 2005), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *Doctor Dolittle* (1967; 1998); the discovery of new technologies such as fire and agriculture in such films as *The Terminator* (1984) and *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001); changing demographic patterns such as the birth of cities in films such as *Earth* (1998), *Metropolis* (1927), and *Collateral* (2004); and the most common today, human sexuality, love-making, and the relations between sexes in such films as *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Fire* (1996).

Film may also be compared to myth with regard to mythic patterns. Mythic patterns are the core narrative structures that myths tend to follow. Films are often purposefully crafted by their authors to follow these patterns, for example George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977) is based on the work of a theorist of myth Joseph Campbell, and the Wachowski brother’s *Matrix* is based on myths of Gnosticism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Indeed Campbell’s theory of myth is taught in screenwriting classes as a way to sell successful screenplays.

These films represent one of the most powerful mythic patterns, often termed “the hero pattern.” In these types of myth, the main character is a superhuman being who is born in unusual circumstances, has special powers, and is persecuted but eventually overcomes persecutions, especially those of death, darkness, or evil. Moses, Krishna, the Buddha, and Jesus are all examples of the hero character in myth. The character Luke in the *Star Wars* series may be regarded as a hero character, for he has an unusual birth (he is in fact a prince), has special powers (the Force), and overcomes the forces of death, darkness, or evil. The slew of superhero movies such as *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and most westerns also adhere to this pattern. In the latter, an outsider or drifter of strange circumstance protects a frontier town from evildoers; examples include *Shane* (1953) and many of John Wayne’s films.

A few more patterns are worth mentioning. For example, another common pattern in films of today’s Hollywood is the “end of the world” pattern. Scholars of religion call myths about the end of the world “eschatology” and myths about forecasts of the cataclysmic destruction of this world “apocalypticism.” In these myths, the world is threatened by the powers of death, darkness, or evil. Often,
a hero savior is required to save the world from the powers of destruction. Films such as Independence Day (1996), War of the Worlds (2005), and Armageddon (1998), represent this pattern.

A third example is the “journey to the underworld” pattern. In these myths, a character must journey to the far off land of the dead, often to meet, trick, or defeat its ruler, represented in films such as the Lord of the Rings series (Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring [2001]; Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers [2002]; Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King [2003]), and Apocalypse Now (1979). This theme is common to ancient myths from Egypt and is part of the mythic cycle of the Odyssey.

A final example worth mentioning is the “trickster” pattern. In these myths, a crafty, scheming character, usually an animal of some kind with human features, makes trouble for another character. In the end, either the trickster gets away with his mischief or falls prey to it himself. The trickster is usually not wholly good or evil but rather an ambiguous figure whose activities often serve as a catalyst for good or evil indirectly. For example, in many myths tricksters are the ones who bring humanity technology and culture, such as the snake in the biblical Garden of Eden, who brings knowledge, and Prometheus in Greek myth, who tricks the gods into giving humanity fire. Films that incorporate this pattern include Ace Ventura (1994), The Pink Panther (1963), and The Nutty Professor (1996).

As scholastic theories about myth become more widely circulated and indeed are used as tools for screenwriting, films have also become increasingly reflexive about their relation to myth. This reflexivity is exemplified in a film such as Unbreakable (2000), which preceded the rash of films about superheroes such as Spider-Man (2002), X-Men (2000), The Incredible Hulk (2008), and Fantastic Four (2005), all of which were adapted from comic books. The film skillfully plays on the human propensity to be gripped by stories about superhuman characters formerly found in the domain of myth but which today are often embodied in film.

As noted previously, we also find films that are simply the retelling of classic myths in cinematic form—for example, Greek myths in such films as Hercules (1997) and Troy (2004), biblical myths in The Ten Commandments (1956), Hindu myths in Mahabharata (1989) and Agni Varsha (The Fire and the Rain, 2002), Chinese folk myths incorporated into Kung Fu movies such as Shaolin Temple (1976), Buddhist myths as in Little Buddha (1993) and Shaka (Buddha, 1961), and of course the numerous cinematic retellings of the life and passion of Jesus, most recently The Passion of the Christ (2004).

But calling film the modern myth is not without its analytic problems, for there are significant differences between the terms. The first important difference is that myths, especially those about the nature and origin of the world (that the world emerged from the navel of a god or was created in six days), called creation
myths, are presented as true, not as fiction or falsity. In other words, myths are believed. Aside from documentary forms of filmmaking, films are not generally thought to be true but are fictive in nature. In both cases audiences "suspend disbelief"; they are willing to entertain ideas they normally would not take to be true. In the case of filmgoers, this suspension generally evaporates at the conclusion of the film, while in the case of myth, it lives on. Recently, film has challenged this dichotomy, blurring the line between fiction and reality in such movies as C'est arrivé près de chez vous (Man Bites Dog, 1992), Adaptation (2002), and more recently Stranger than Fiction (2006). Indeed, many postmodern film theorists think that the distinction should be challenged.

Another difference is that, partly because myths are believed to be true, they usually have authority that films do not have. Myths are often part of a broader religious landscape and are packaged together with doctrines that require an individual's compliance. Myths are thus sometimes enforced by dominant groups over less powerful ones. Sometimes films such as The Birth of a Nation (1915) or, more recently, Kurttar vadisi—Iraq (Valley of the Wolves: Iraq, 2006) may serve these purposes in the form of propaganda.

Myths are understood by scholars to be culturally transmitted and constituted, fashioned organically out of the elements of culture that surround us. Thus the third major difference between myth and film is that there are no individual authors of myth. Myths are authored collectively by repetition and transmission over time, while films are most often the artistic creation of an individual or nameable group of individuals.

A final difference is that, technically, film and myth are different forms of media. In their technical sense, myths are oral performances, whereas films are recordings of speech and visual performance. As a form of recording like writing, film is a second-order representation in comparison to myth. Since we naturally organize our lives and communicative tendencies in the form of narratives, myths access a primitive layer of speech and memory, fitting smoothly with human cognitive architecture. These factors were especially helpful in transmitting and remembering myths before the invention of writing and other forms of inscription. Cognitively, that is, in the mind of any individual, myths still retain their predominantly oral characteristics. Thus although myths must be remembered, films need not be in order to live on as cultural products.

To conclude, we may say that, despite the caveats stated above, film utilizes many features of myth, both deliberately and unconsciously, and in this sense film may be thought of as a modern form of myth making. Furthermore, in the present era of globalization, larger geopolitical movements—such as the rise of religious forms of nationalism or conflicts over sacred space that are encouraged by religious myths—are played out through the medium of film; for example Ha Helder
(Time of Favor, 2000), Seven Years in Tibet (1997), and Thunderheart (1992). With the recent “return of religion” in the form of religious fundamentalisms throughout the world, this tendency is becoming more common.

Film is thus part of larger global currents reacting to the godless ideologies of secularization and liberalism; many argue that without myth, life is meaningless. A great number of films in recent decades have expressed precisely this lack of myth and lack of meaning—for example, Rashōmon (1950), which explores the nature of truth following the Second World War, and La Vita è bella (Life Is Beautiful, 1997). Many more recent films—such as Gerry (2002), American Beauty (1999), and About Schmidt (2002)—have sought to capture eitherthe emptiness that seems to characterize postindustrial capitalism or to restore a sense of cosmic unity or mystery—such as I ♥ Huckabees (2004), and Donnie Darko (2001). Whether through special effects, story line, or the imagistic rhythms of film itself, this capacity to re-enchant is precisely the reason why many scholars regard film as modern myth.

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See also: End-of-the-World Films; Film as Religion; Greek and Roman Myths; Kurosawa, Akira; The Matrix Trilogy; Westerns.

Further Reading


