

Modern Myth

Opening Night address by Jazmina Cininas, 2016

Less than a fortnight ago, The Guardian newspaper ran an article proposing that fairytales have been part of human culture since the Bronze Age. It seems our need for tales of good and evil, of punishment and reward, of transformation and redemption, is as old as humanity itself, stretching back to ancient ages and long dead tongues. We may no longer believe in the veracity of capricious gods or enchanted lands ruled by magic and giants and yet, the myths of our past continue to demand our attention and fascination, reinvented and regurgitated in recurring symbolic themes. Peruse the highest grossing films of all time and you will find an overrepresentation of fantasy and the fantastical in our popular entertainment, manifesting in the alien universes of Star Wars and Avatar, the magical dining halls and dungeons of Harry Potter, the super powers and superheroes and villains of a Marvel comic brought to life, or – as any parent of a primary-school-aged daughter will tell you, the sub zero sisterhood of Elsa and Anna.

In her collection of essays, *Six Myths of our Time*, the English mythographer Marina Warner writes:

“We're living in a new age of faith of sorts, of myth-making, of monsters and chimaeras.

The fictions and narratives of a society contribute as fundamentally to its character as its laws and economy and political arrangements... Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context ...[They] convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but ...never set so hard they cannot be changed again; newly told stories can be more helpful than repeating old ones.”

So, with that in mind...

Once upon a time, in the fabled hamlet of Brunswick, the benevolent curator Domenica of Vavala gathered a cast of storytellers within the walls of Castle Counihan. Naturally, these were no ordinary tellers of tales. In place of words or manuscripts, these new minstrels of mythmaking wove their tales with colours and symbols, with shimmering artefacts and flickering projections.

Eleven made up their number; a cricket team of visual raconteurs, or a soccer side of pictorial storytellers, if you prefer. A slippery number, the “blazon of sin” according to Saint Augustine, the number of internal conflict and rebellion, of exaggeration and extravagance. The number of days that simply disappeared in 1752 when Britain switched to the Gregorian calendar, and Wednesday 2nd September was followed by Thursday 14th September.

Rumour has it that at first, there were only ten when, at the eleventh hour, the eleventh member entered their midst, hopefully not entirely reminiscent of the forgotten fairy whom everyone thought dead until she burst uninvited into a royal christening bringing a curse of sleep upon the kingdom.

Or that the ten were never really ten to begin with, for how does one properly count the two-headed Takahashi, who prefer their correspondence addressed Dear Plastic? In the Modern Myth, there are no absolutes, and nothing is what it first seems. But on with the story.

Conventional wisdom tells us that the beginning is a very good place to start, so very well, let's begin at the beginning. Alesh Macak's personal Tardis takes us back before Once upon a time, before the Bronze Age even, to a time before time. In Vignettes of a Forgotten Time, Castle Counihan's resident Time Lord has charted a course from the heart of the earth's forests to edge of universe. To where supernovas give birth to new planets with twin suns and kaleidoscopic clouds. To the first breath of the oceans and primordial quivering of the forests. To the very beginning - and the very end - of time

Joining Alesh at the dawn of creation are Dear Plastic. Like the Shinto gods Izanagi and Izanami giving birth to the Japanese archipelago, Yumi and Masahiro conjure up new lands filled with sunshine and possibility, inviting us through rainbow gateways into candy-coloured vignettes of happiness, where clouds the colour of fairy floss form crowns for innocents and optimists.

If we follow in shadow of Joseph Campbell, beginnings give way to adventures in which the known and the familiar are abandoned for the unknown, whether this be:

“a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but ... always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, super human deeds, and impossible delight.”

Heeding the call, watercolour fabulist Domenica Vavala, scales the peaks of Mount Lullailaco on the Argentinian border, passing through willow patterned landscapes to lost lands where half a millennium ago, fifteen year old Sun Virgins drank eternal sleeping potions of coca leaves and maize beer so that crops might flourish and the weather be kind, their perfectly preserved bodies resurrected 500 years later, like Incan Sleeping Beauties.

The arctic fogs of Canada and Reykjavik still cling to Carmel Seymour's watercolours and works on paper. Her intrepid travellers navigate snow-blind landscapes and tripping hazards armed only with woollen coats, outstretched hands and trust. Or they may embark on pilgrimages to improbable mountaintops where gravity makes way for levitating rocks, and radiant force fields rival the splendour and palette of the Northern Lights.

My own ancestral pilgrimage has transported me to the animist forests of pagan Lithuania, where a lingering whiff of the brewery offers a conduit between Baltic and Antipodean folk traditions, and birds and beasts do battle on the dance floor in shimmering, armoured feathers and fur.

The rules of monomythic tradition entitle the hero – or heroine – to at least one supernatural guardian with the power to bestow a talisman, enchantment or knowledge, enabling one to overcome the dragons and lesser monsters one is bound to meet along the quest.

Minela Krupić takes on the mantle of fairy godmother, preserving histories and visualising new futures for the latest wave of refugees overwhelmed by the challenges of a new language and culture, her empathy born of her own exile from war-torn Bosnia Herzegovina and her earliest encounters and cultural collisions with Australia.

Eddy Carrol's frayed amulet of satin chains and bridal tulle - suspended like unrequited longing - harnesses the counsel of Xhaansi costumiers, while a sequined shadow hints at Mesopotamian meditations and mysteries. Like a genie released from a lamp, Shadow self Shadow simultaneously promises eternal glamour yet appears as elusive and ephemeral as smoke released into abandoned opium dens.

Paul Compton prefers the cravats, black taffeta and heavy velvets of Victorian boudoirs, harnessing the happenstance of collage and consorting with fortune-tellers and gaslight spiritualists to create his personalised tarot deck. This major arcana inevitably predicts calamity and catastrophe, but always offers just enough optimism, and good humour, to enable one to piece the shattered fragments of the self back together again, if not necessarily in the same order.

For where is mythology without a good dose of metamorphosis, whether the transformation be a revelation, a liberation, or a punishment, a curse? Annette Phillips plumbs the beauty myths of classical Greece, resurrecting the cautionary legend of Narcissus, adding a Midas touch in which foraged refuse from local tips, nature strips and op shops is transformed into exuberant, colour saturated sculpture.

Deborah Klein's beetle women might equally be the victims of their own vanities, cursed to lives as nature's jewels and ornaments, or captured and displayed as trophies by entomological Bluebeards. Or perhaps the jewelled wings are the very things that allow these women to escape their ivory towers and domestic prisons, the stingers a welcome substitute for darning needles.

Recalling the story of the brave little tailor, Linda Studená reveals the hierarchies of fiction within myth making by squeezing water, or more accurately tears, from stone, and exposing the vanities and exaggerations on which nationhood is built. Glimpsed in a blur from a moving car, Prague's four monuments to Czech cultural tradition, the heroic Myslbek statues, have been usurped by Kleenex tissues and ephemerality. Three of the statues may glorify verified heroes and heroines from the annals of Czech mythology, however the fourth couple, warriors Záboj and Slávo, miraculously materialised - like an Ern Malley poem - in the nineteenth century, begging the question: is a hoax more, or less, mythical than a myth?

In an age when webs are spun in cyberspace, just when does a false rumour, a traveller's tale, a parable, a decommissioned religious belief, an urban legend, an old wives' tale, the sworn testament of a friend of a friend, enter the sanctioned lexicon of a nation's mythos? Our footwear may have changed, but it seems that humankind is eternally embarking on a perpetual quest for the new myths of their time, often retracing the steps of our past in order to more fully comprehend our present, and increase our chances of a happily ever after.

And so, in a month of inconstant days - the only month in which one might not see a single full moon - in a year with too many days, in the topsy turvy land where summer takes place in winter and swans are black instead of white, on behalf of the eleven artists who might really be twelve, I invite you to uncover your own heroes and heroines, and to take your own steps towards the Modern Myth.

The End

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