

Practical Campbell

Movies:

The Medium for Myth?

In this Practical Campbell essay, Stephen Gerringer (bodhi_bliss) explores the mythic impact of modern mass media on our culture—and the way in which one of the most modern of art forms has helped to birth forth new myth.



**Joseph Campbell
Foundation**

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PRACTICAL CAMPBELL

The Movies: Medium for Myth?

[The modern myth] has to do with machines, airshots, the size of the universe, it's got to deal with what we're living with.

Star Wars deals with the essential problem: Is the machine going to control humanity, or is the machine going to serve humanity? Darth Vader is a man taken over by a machine, he becomes a machine, and the state itself is a machine. There is no humanity in the state. What runs the world is economics and politics, and they have nothing to do with the spiritual life.

So we are left with this void. It's the job of the artist to create the new myths. Myths come from the artists.

- Joseph Campbell, interviewed by Chris Goodrich in **Publisher's Weekly** (1985)

In the absence of a dynamic, contemporary mythology that supports the spiritual life, Joseph Campbell notes the creative artist is left holding the shaman's torch, illuminating the dark passages and sacred shadows for those who seek to experience the mysteries of myth. Campbell draws on the giants of twentieth century art and literature as examples of this principle in play - James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Paul Klee, and Pablo Picasso, among others. It's not difficult to equate Joe's conception of the artist with genius, particularly given a circle of friends and acquaintances that over a lifetime included master sculptor Antoine Bourdelle, novelist John Steinbeck, dancer/choreographer Martha Graham, avant-garde musician John Cage, director George Lucas, and the Grateful Dead,

... mavericks, all – but, apart from Lucas, hardly household names.

There is a tendency to assume that the artist-as-shaman speaks only to an elite, as if there exists an unbridgeable divide between Art and popular culture. Comic books, movies, television, video games and such are considered merely the trappings of pop culture - the profit-oriented mass media mass-producing the entertainment that serves primarily as an escape - bread and circuses to placate the restless mob.

But do films and other popular media play a role in creating and conveying mythologies? Does Hollywood merely borrow a mythic theme here and there – or might the movies serve as a vehicle for myth?

There are moments when Campbell wonders if Hollywood is up to the challenge:

I never really caught on to the talkie as an interesting art. Too naturalistic, you know? Naturalism is the death of art. And that's one of the big problems in our American arts, I think - they don't understand the metaphor. It's all naturalism

- Joseph Campbell, The Hero's Journey, p. 185

I've never seen anything in movies that seemed to be myth-directed.

- Joseph Campbell, interviewed by Tom Collins in "In Context: A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture," Vol. 12 (Winter 1985/1986), published by the Context Institute

In the wake of Star Wars, however, Campbell was willing to entertain previously unacknowledged possibilities ... though not without some reservations.

LUCAS AN ANOMALY?

The motion picture as an art form held little appeal for the mature Joseph Campbell. He points out that he rarely went to movies, as he was "deep into my scholarship" – and then Joe and his wife, noted dancer Jean Erdmann, lived in the heart of Greenwich Village. Leisure time was more likely to be spent attending the theater – whether plays, dance, or other performance art – or in small, intimate, gatherings with close friends, many of whom were artists, starving as well as established. Jean eventually formed her own dance company and, with Joe's active participation, founded the influential *Theater of the Open Eye*. Jean and Joe lived, worked, and played in a creative setting their whole life together, immersed in the lively arts; they had little time to waste on seemingly frivolous fare.

Hence they really weren't paying attention in the late seventies when the *Star Wars* phenomenon swept the country. According to Campbell, it had been at least fifteen years since he had seen a movie - which indicates how little the film industry factored in to Campbell's thought.

It's not that he didn't consider film an art form – in fact, in the sixties Joseph Campbell served as president of the Creative Film Foundation, a Maya Derens project designed to encourage and reward young artists; however, these student art films weren't designed with the general public in mind.

(Joe later expressed his surprise on viewing Lucas's student effort, *THX 1138*, which paralleled themes and techniques common to submissions Campbell reviewed for the film foundation: "We had these by the dozen every year! It was very thrilling to see that this man had started out where they all start, you might say, and then in two enormous leaps made these grand strides ..." – from The Hero's Journey, p. 220).

Of course, you'd think Joe might have suspected something more than synchronicity when the one commercial film he does remember seeing in the sixties - Stanley Kubrick's production of Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey* - opened with a scene right out of Primitive Mythology (the first of Campbell's four volumes in The Masks of God).

Fifteen years later Joseph experienced a major epiphany when, seemingly out of the blue, George Lucas flew Jean and Joe to San Rafael to view the first three episodes of the *Star Wars* saga (Episodes IV – VI), all in one day:

I saw the **Star Wars** movies recently ... And I could see my own stuff up there, no doubt about that. I ended up a fan, in great admiration of that young man. He has an artist's imagination and a great sense of responsibility to his public that what he is rendering must have value. And with all the galaxies out there to work with, he's got the kind of open field the early poets used to have. For example, when the Greek Argonauts go up into the Black Sea, where nobody had been, they could meet all kinds of strange monsters and strange people – Amazons and such. It's a blank sheet for the play of the imagination.

As I watched these movies, I realized that he is systematically using the archetypes that he learned about from my books ...

- Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss*, p. 131

But is George Lucas an anomaly? Is he the exception, or the rule? Are movies and other popular media proper vehicles for myth, or merely a bromide for the masses? Are we in danger of revealing priceless secrets, harnessing mythic motifs in the service of mammon? Or might movies accurately reflect the emerging cultural mythos?

PEARLS BEFORE SWINE?

Joseph Campbell seems of two minds at times. He might never have given the subject much thought had Lucas's acknowledgment of Campbell's influence not brought the matter to his attention. Campbell's views appear to evolve over time – while he is clearly fascinated by the possibilities of the medium, he's at the same time hesitant to trust an industry that favors the profit motive over artistic vision:

[Movies] might be our counterpart to mythological re-enactments – except that we don't have the same kind of thinking going into the production of a movie that goes into the production of an initiation ritual ...

[W]hat is unfortunate for us is that a lot of the people who write these stories do not have the sense of their responsibility. These stories are making and breaking lives. But the movies are made to simply make money. The kind of responsibility that goes into a priesthood with a ritual is not there. That is one of our problems today ...

- *Joseph Campbell (with Bill Moyers), The Power of Myth, p.102 (small paperback edition)*

Certainly money drives the industry – but studios are unable to completely ignore substance. Despite a tendency to appeal to the lowest common denominator, only so many sequels to *Porky's* and *Friday the 13th* suffice before a significant portion of the audience develops a craving for efforts of greater depth and creativity. The film industry would stagnate were it to divorce completely from the creative artist – those writers, directors, and actors with vision.

Both Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell suggest the creative imagination is formed of the same substance as myth and dream - so the surprise would be if mythic themes and the hero's journey were **not** represented in the movies, as in the other arts. Indeed, despite Campbell's concerns, several significant films – such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Matrix*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Passion of the Christ*, or the recent *Brokeback Mountain* – are described by participants on all levels, from directors and writers, to cast and crew, with a level of passion, awe and commitment rivaling that of religious devotees - which suggests there **are** movies produced with the same kind of attention to symbol and presentation that attends religious rites.

Campbell believes myths arise from the visionary experience of exceptional individuals, and offers examples of shamans who translate the images of their visions into ritual and myth (e.g., the Lakota shaman Black Elk, Keeper of the Sacred Pipe, or Australian aborigine shamans). These mythic images speak not to the head, but directly to the heart – and so a myth strikes a corresponding chord in the interior of those for whom it is meant, evoking a sense of *participation mystique*. Myths then continue to evolve as they are passed down from one generation to the next around communal fires, during sacred celebrations, or in transmission from one culture to another. Unfortunately, myths and ritual tend to grow stagnant and rigid in the hands of an entrenched priesthood.

The priest presents for consideration a compound of inherited forms with the expectation (or, at times, even requirement) that one should interpret and experience them in a certain authorized way, whereas the artist first has an experience of his own, which he then seeks to interpret and communicate through effective forms. **Not the forms first and then the experience, but the experience first and then the forms.**

Who, however, will be touched by these forms and be moved by them to an experience of his own? By what magic can a personal experience be communicated to another? And who is going to listen?

- Joseph Campbell, "Mythological Themes in Creative Literature and Art," *The Mythic Dimension*, p. 186 (emphasis mine)

Today it is the artist who has an inward visionary experience and then gives it life, representing the creative vision in a chosen medium. As to who "will be touched by these forms and be moved by them to an experience of his own," Campbell recognizes this as a

possibility inherent in film. Asked whether people get any value from the mythic content of movies like *Star Wars* and *Excalibur*, he responds:

Well, I'm told they do, but I haven't seen a movie for something like fifteen years, and I can't speak from my own experience or judgment, but I think that the movie is the perfect medium for mythological messages. The medium is so plastic and pliable and magic things can happen. And then the combination, you know, of fantastic landscape and possible modes of action and voyaging that we can hardly conceive of in good solid terms ... That's a mythological realm, and movies could handle this kind of thing.

- Joseph Campbell, with Michael Toms, "The Wisdom of Joseph Campbell," *Mythic Dimensions* (1997), Tape 3, Side 1

In *The Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers, Joe offers a specific example: "I've heard youngsters use some of George Lucas' terms – "the Force" and "the dark side." So it must be hitting somewhere. It's a good sound teaching, I would say" (p. 177, small paperback edition).

Michael Toms, citing Robert Bly, wonders if the cinematic presentation of mythological themes might be giving away the store to the uninitiated, revealing sacred mysteries better left secret. Campbell acknowledges Bly's concern, and points out that just presenting a mythological image is ineffective if it does not work on a level beyond rational consciousness:

"... [Y]ou have to participate in it. That's the sense of the ritual – it's an enactment of a myth, and by participating in the rite you're participating in the mythic message. And myths don't count if they're just hitting your rational faculties: they have to hit the heart and then be absorbed, and you have to absorb them and adjust to them and make them your own life, and perhaps going from one movie to another like that, the thing's just passing too fast. People in a religious tradition live with that myth from infancy, and it builds in, builds in, builds in ... and one mustn't mistake just picking up a story, playing a role, for absorbing a myth and making it the structuring form of your life.

- "The Wisdom of Joseph Campbell," *Tape 3, Side 1*

And yet I'd argue that movies do that – not just an individual movie, in isolation – even one with the impact of *Star Wars* – but the sum of all movies the last century present a fluid medium on which is projected an ever evolving cultural mythos – conscious or no, these images do reflect the structuring forms of our lives.

Joseph Campbell wasn't keeping track – but had he the time to focus on the field of popular film over the decades, he might have noted a mythic tapestry as rich and vibrant as that underlying the other arts. Given that cinema evolved from theater, and the dramatic arts have their origin in the performance of sacred rites - and also considering that ritual, theater, and film all foster a suspension of disbelief, coupled with a sense of *participation mystique* known to trigger cathartic release - there should be little surprise that movies present a platform for myth.



MYTHIC RESONANCE

A common perception today seems to be that the Novel has written “The End” to myth: an author may well weave archetypal images and mythic concerns into a story, but no room is left for motifs to morph around the campfire as myths take on a life of their own - instead, each tale is etched in marble the moment the book rolls off the press. Novels remain individual efforts, intended for individuals, rather than elements of a dynamic, changing, living mythology ...

or might that be a “myth”-conception?

Stories have a history of leaping from printed page to silver screen – whether we begin with classical literature or comic books. The classic tales **are** told and retold around our culture's version of the collective campfire, changing from year to year and generation to generation,

in cast and presentation, if not in plot. Whether it's Alistair Sims, George C. Scott, or even Bill Murray who growls "Bah! Humbug!" we are still visited by the Spirits of Christmas, Past, Present, and Future, and experience ever anew Scrooge's epiphany.

(As Marley's specter thunders, "Humanity **was** my business!")

In fact, in my own experience, Christmas provides a textbook example of how the movies can support a mythic structure.

Christmas is my favorite holiday. The irony is that I am not Christian today, nor am I able to draw on childhood memories or a strong family tradition. My siblings and I were the third generation in a strict fundamentalist cult that eschewed Christmas, Easter, and Halloween as pagan - and hence, satanic - celebrations, observing instead the more biblical Hebrew festivals.

Our church's stance towards Christmas and similar "worldly" holidays was complete and total nonparticipation. I could not sing Christmas songs with my class, and had to leave school early the afternoons of Halloween, Christmas, and Valentine's Day parties to avoid contamination - so no Easter Egg hunts, no trick-or-treat, no presents under the tree. Relatives who made the mistake of sending gifts had their packages returned unopened. I even recall church pastors railing from the pulpit that "Santa" is an anagram for "Satan"; a cheerful "Merry Christmas!" from a helpful salesclerk was taken as a slap in the face and an insult to God.

Once off to college however, I evolved beyond that mindset

(which only confirms what adherents of so many strictly literal sects believe, whether Christian, Islamic, or other - a little education can be a dangerous thing ...).

Celebrating Christmas for the first time in my early twenties proved only slightly awkward: my first tree had bright lights and shiny brand new Christmas ornaments, and looked no doubt a little like a superficial re-creation of a "real" Christmas Tree - took a few years to collect ornaments and trinkets imbued with personal *mana* - the memories and recollections

of significant moments and people in my life - and to learn the art of placing lights and ornaments deep within the interior of the tree, spontaneously creating dozens of warm, inviting, mysterious tableaux amid shifting shadows and light

... but, nevertheless, Christmas came easily to me.

Why is that? In the absence of tradition and experience, how did the practice take root so well?

Even though my family never celebrated Christmas, we grew up in the womb of our culture. The mythology supporting that culture is woven into the fabric of our lives, whether we recognize it or not. We may have shied away from all things Christmas, but we could not shut out every image

... and the mythic images we did see spoke a story to the heart at odds with the one the preachers directed at our heads.

Cary Grant, David Niven, and Loretta Young in *The Bishop's Wife* (and the Denzel Washington re-make, *The Preacher's Wife*), O. Henry's altruistic lovers in "The Gift of the Magi," the longsuffering Jimmy Stewart in *It's A Wonderful Life*, the sweetly dysfunctional middle-America family of *A Christmas Story*, the Christmas-stealing Grinch, or last year's magical *Polar Express*, all present bits and pieces of the Christmas mythos

... which suggests how literature and movies reflect and even shape a culture's mythology.

Images from and references to the films and stories mentioned above permeate American culture, presenting themes picked up via osmosis rather than through enforced indoctrination. Few films bludgeon the viewer with Christian doctrine. In fact, apart from Linus's recitation from the Gospel of Luke in "A Charlie Brown Christmas," even the image of the Christ child in the manger floats, at best, somewhere in the distant background of most productions, while in the forefront compassion, joy, celebration, and renewal are emphasized - traits characteristic of all celebrations of the winter solstice regardless of culture.

Movies reflect myth, not dogma - they are better at conveying an experience of the heart than a detailed theology. Despite the childhood gap, I found myself firmly rooted in a tradition on which to draw as I embraced Christmas.

However I didn't recognize the power of myth in the movies until I saw Christopher Reeves in *Superman*, in the late seventies

(not the best date movie – special effects and a tightly scripted plot distracted from more traditional drive-in activities ...)

Hard to miss the Messianic overtones:

A baby not of this Earth, displaying supernatural powers, born of a heavenly father yet raised by surrogate human parents, comes of age, retreats into a desolate wilderness (the Arctic Circle) for a period of instruction and preparation, then returns to the world, sacrifices personal desires and relationships, and employs his power to benefit mankind

... now where have we heard that story before?

We are compelled to keep telling each other the same tales ... comes with being human.

King Kong's legend, for example, has been told in 1933, 1976, and, most recently, last month.

(That's not counting the various inane "son of Kong" sequels, knockoffs – like *Mighty Joe Young* – and innumerable guest appearances battling Godzilla and the other screen monsters who apparently regularly menace the Japanese archipelago).

The mythic resonance rings clear:

It's really "Beauty and the Beast." It is a fairy story. Fairy stories are open to any number of interpretations. There's one for each member of the audience. And it's the same with this.

- *Documentary filmmaker Kevin Brownlow, commenting on Peter Jackson's "King Kong," on CBS Sunday Morning, December 2006.*

(Even political pundits recognize mythic themes: PBS's John McLaughlin and conservative commentator Pat Buchanan see in the current Kong a reflection of an emerging "environmental religion" positing a Nature that has been defiled by civilization – an observation which, alas, would take us off course on a delicious, albeit distracting, tangent into the cosmic and cultural orientation of works ranging from *Dances with Wolves* to *Lord of the Rings* and *The Matrix* ...)

But the media's "talking heads" may be onto something ...)

Just as myths dream themselves onward around the communal campfire, so too do today's corresponding enchantments, shifting shape in the flickering light projected from Hollywood dream factories. Batman, sporting day-glo colors and campy plots in the sixties, turns dark and conflicted on the big screen, struggling with his own shadow film after film. Peter Pan, too, appears in many guises, each of which further flesh out this character: in a Disney cartoon; or, on the small screen, in the skin of Mary Martin or Cathy Rigby as the playful, somewhat androgynous *puer aeternus*; in the historical encounter that ignited author J. M. Barrie's imagination in *Neverland*; or in the middle-aged, world weary figure of Robin Williams, who has lost touch with the magic and creativity of childhood, in *Hook*.

... all riffs on a common motif – and so the myth dreams itself onward once more

THE HERO IN A THOUSAND PICTURES

The pattern of the Hero's Quest did not originate with Joseph Campbell – Joe merely identified a motif long present in myth, fairy tale, legend, and literature of every type. This holds for film as well. Movies – yet another form of the storyteller's art – have spontaneously followed this same archetypal structure since well before Campbell wrote word one of The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949).

At roughly the same time that Lucas introduced audiences to Darth Vader and Obi Wan Knobi, Christopher Vogler - a story analyst for Disney - penned a seven-page memo entitled “A Practical Guide to The Hero with a Thousand Faces.” Vogler introduced this dynamic, citing examples in movies ranging from *The Wizard of Oz* and *High Noon* to *East of Eden* and *Annie Hall*. The memo circulated throughout Disney before leaking out to the rest of the industry. Several studios – Disney in particular - consciously adapted “the Hero's Journey” as a screenwriting formula – a number that swelled after Lucas publicly acknowledged his debt to Campbell. *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, and *Shrek* are among the many productions crafted with Campbell's model in mind

Vogler, in fact, was story consultant on the first two mentioned. His original memo has since been expanded into book form as The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers – a surprisingly useful resource, offering a perceptive analysis of how Campbell's observations apply to the cinematic arts.

As wonderful a tribute as it is to acknowledge Campbell's influence, I doubt he'd be comfortable with a legacy of formulaic films tending towards uniformity and mediocrity - which is not to say that *Lion King* and *Shrek* aren't brilliant and creative – I loved them – but they do spawn a slew of dull and predictable second and third rate efforts that pretend to follow the map, yet manage to miss the sparkle. Vogler does attempt to inoculate his readers against this approach, but there have been Hollywood hacks - shades of Procrustes - who wield this design in cookie-cutter fashion, sacrificing substance in the process.

The mythic form Campbell identifies as “the hero's journey” tends to emerge **spontaneously** from the creative imagination: familiarity with Campbell's work can certainly inspire, as with Lucas and Spielberg, helping an artist recognize what it is that bubbles up from the depths of

her/his own soul ... but The Hero with a Thousand Faces is no substitute for artistic vision. You can't just plug it in and get a masterpiece.

Indeed, the most elegant cinematic evocation of the hero's journey since Campbell's passing appears in the screen translation of The Lord of the Rings. Director Peter Jackson might be familiar with Campbell's work, but Tolkien's novels owe nothing to Joe's writing, except insofar as they both spring from a thorough grounding in the same source material. The trilogy is richly layered throughout with complex archetypal iconography, every image dense with mythic associations. Multiple elements of the hero's quest play out on myriad levels in combinations fresh and unique, yet ever echoing the common theme.

The correspondence between the trilogy (whether book or film) and Campbell's template is clear – a correspondence noted by scholars decades ago, later spelled out in Randall Helms' Tolkien's World (1974), and Anne Petty's classic, One Ring to Bind Them All: Tolkien's Mythology (1979) - but its power resides in the fact that this correspondence is spontaneous, rather than derived.

In The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949), Joseph Campbell identifies a trajectory common to most myths and hero tales, consisting of three major movements – *Separation/Initiation/Return*. A hero is called out of the ordinary, everyday world – s/he undergoes trials and ordeals that culminate in initiation into a greater reality, one that transcends the individual – and then returns to the day world to share with others the boons that have been won.

[Campbell] found that all storytelling, consciously or not, follows the ancient patterns of myth and that all stories, from the crudest jokes to the highest flights of literature, can be understood in terms of the Hero's Journey ...

The pattern of the Hero's Journey is universal, occurring in every culture, every time. It is as infinitely varied as the human race itself and yet its basic form remains constant. The Hero's Journey is an incredibly tenacious set of elements that springs endlessly from the deepest reaches of the human mind; different in details for every culture, but fundamentally the same.

Christopher Vogler, The Writer's Journey, p.10

Of course each movement of this arc is formed of a number of related elements. No myth exhibits a one-to-one correspondence to every single element Campbell identifies in the hero's adventure. Each myth unfolds its own twists and turns, its elements arranged in a configuration unique to itself, yet revealing on examination an inherent organic structure that Campbell, following Joyce, labels the *monomyth*.

Campbell's overarching monomyth thus recognizes the different forks the road might take. (Hence no surprise to find that many creators of interactive video games know Campbell's work.)

For example, the Hero, living in the ordinary world, hears a Call to Adventure, which inspires him to set out on his journey – but this Call could take any of several different forms.

It might be a clear invitation

(e.g., Yahweh instructing Moses through the burning bush to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh; Trinity's first contact with Neo in *The Matrix*),

or completely unconscious

(e.g., a hunter, separated from his companions, pursuing a hart deep into a dark, unknown part of the woods in Celtic legends; Richard Dreyfus sculpting the Devil's Tower out of mashed potatoes in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; Kevin Costner puzzling over a cryptic, disembodied voice in an Iowa cornfield in *Field of Dreams*),

or there might well be a Refusal of the Call

(e.g., Jonah fleeing by boat to avoid God's command to go to Ninevah; Luke Skywalker initially declining Ben Knobi's invitation to help him rescue Princess Leia).

Similarly, there is the meeting with the Mentor, which Campbell places near the beginning of the hero's journey. This movement in the cycle consists of a period of apprenticeship - the Mentor traditionally provides the Hero with the gifts necessary to face the ordeals he'll meet on his quest

(e.g., Parzival's time with Gurnemanz, the veteran knight who trains him in the ways of chivalry, in Arthurian lore; Wesley's offscreen apprenticeship to the Dread Pirate Roberts in *The Princess Bride*; and, of course, Luke Skywalker's instruction from Obi Wan Knobi and then Yoda in *Star Wars*).

Eventually, after a series of tests and ordeals, the Hero arrives at the climax – the moment of initiation. And what is the initiation?

Heroes must die so they can be reborn. The dramatic movement that audiences enjoy more than any other is death and rebirth. In some way in every story, heroes face death or something like it: their greatest fears, the failure of an enterprise, the end of a relationship, the death of an old personality. Most of the time, they magically survive this death and are literally or symbolically reborn to reap the consequences of having survived death. They have passed the main test of being a hero.

- Christopher Vogler, *The Writers Journey*, p. 159

No need to recall in detail the entire cycle: these are but a few of the elements of the Hero's Journey motif we find in so many movies, even those that are not overtly mythic – no gods and goddesses and such in *Casablanca* or the *James Bond* franchise, yet they too fit the classic pattern.

CORRESPONDING FUNCTIONS

A mythological order is a system of images that gives consciousness a sense of meaning in existence, which, my dear friend, has no meaning – it simply is. But the mind goes asking for meanings; it can't play unless it knows (or makes up) some system of rules.

Mythologies present games to play: how to make believe you're doing thus and so. Ultimately, through the game, you experience that positive thing which is the experience of being-in-being, of living meaningfully.

- Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss*, p.6

Campbell speaks of four functions a mythology performs (which does not mean every myth in a mythological tradition speaks to all four functions). In brief, Campbell identifies these functions as follows:

1. The Metaphysical (or “Mystical”) Function – *“to evoke in the individual a sense of grateful, affirmative awe before the monstrous mystery that is existence.”*

2. The Cosmological Function – *“to present an image of the cosmos, of the universe round about, that will maintain and elicit this experience of awe.”*

3. The Sociological Function – *“to validate and maintain a certain sociological system: a shared set of right and wrongs, proprieties or improprieties, on which one’s particular social unit depends for its existence.”*

4. The Psychological (or “Pedagogical”) Function – *“to carry the individual through the stages of one’s life, from birth through maturity through senility to death.”*

The mythological orientation of Western culture remains in flux – reflected in the much touted “culture wars” dividing the United States – which, as Campbell points out, leaves the second and third functions in disarray, as the cosmology of the Old Testament does not correspond to our experience and understanding of the universe around us, nor can it be claimed the laws that regulate a twenty-first century society are divinely ordained - indeed, the bulk of our laws are at odds with the religious, civil, and dietary code enumerated by Moses in scripture.

(For example, contemporary collective attitudes toward slavery and polygamy have clearly evolved beyond what Yahweh laid down in the Law three thousand years ago.)

These functions now are more likely to fall under the purview of secular institutions – science, law, etc.

However, today we find the first and, in particular, the fourth functions addressed by creative artists, who effectively employ mythological imagery from a variety of traditions, ancient and modern, corresponding to images and insights emerging from their own depth experience.

We don’t have much in the way of myth today to help us through these transitions. We can turn to the leftover shards of the old myths, or we can try to turn to art.

- Campbell, [Pathways to Bliss](#), p. 117

Joseph Campbell is referring to the life stages that the psychological function of mythology addresses – and immediately follows this observation with an analysis of how George Lucas

does exactly that. Nor is Lucas alone. The common structure of the Hero's Journey, as delineated by Campbell, serves as a template for life's major initiations – birth, coming of age, finding a partner and raising a family, growing old and dying – all can be seen as variations on the hero's path.

No end of movies address this function – whether *Zorba the Greek*, *Field of Dreams*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *The Graduate*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Unforgiven*, *The Notebook*, *Gandhi* – the list of films that offer wisdom and guidance through life's transitions is endless - and that's not even counting those with overtly mythic content.

We also find aspects of the cosmological and sociological functions of myth playing out onscreen, revealing a possible shift in the cultural perspective. For example, in 1953's *Thunder Bay*, James Stewart plays an oil company engineer whose mission is to convince Cajun shrimp fisherman that drilling for oil in their waters will not harm the shrimp (petroleum is good for the environment!). The archetype of Engineer-as-Hero – a movie staple throughout the first half of the twentieth century - bringing prosperity to the locals by building a dam, digging a canal, drilling for oil, etc., while battling irrational fears of economic and ecological devastation, nears its final hurrah with this film.

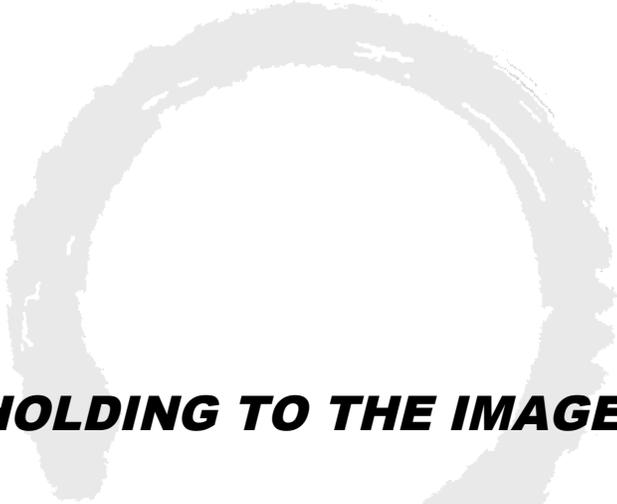
The shift in the collective mythos away from that mindset is in full swing by the last decades of the century - a more holistic, ecological notion of nature as sacred and inviolable appears, not only in “high concept” films – e.g., *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) and *Mindwalk* (1990) – but filters on down to even B-grade action flicks (e.g., *On Deadly Ground* (1994), with Steven Segal wreaking vengeance on corporate villain Michael Caine, whose oil refinery has been raping both the environment and the native peoples of Alaska ... maybe someone had been lying about the shrimp?).

Similarly, in the recent *The Lord of the Rings*, the evil wizard Saruman's industrial Orcs lay waste to the forest in order to build their war machines, thus calling down the wrath of Nature's peaceful, tree-herding Ents (who almost seem old-growth trees come-to-life themselves)

... and, as mentioned above, even political pundits John McLaughlin and Pat Buchanan see this same environmental mythos reflected in *King Kong*.

Do films drive this shift in perspective?

Probably not directly – but a survey of film history suggests movies mirror the culture-at-large, so perhaps we are seeing hints of an emerging mythos that addresses the cosmological and sociological functions of myth in imagery more consistent with our own experience of the world around us. Though it's too early to tell if this shift in perspective is permanent – so much, after all, remains in flux – nevertheless, the multiplex at the local mall may offer better clues to the shape of the myth-to-come than does the neighborhood church.



HOLDING TO THE IMAGE

The magic of film is that it's formed of the same polymorphic fabric as myth and dream, woven from imagination – and image. The power and beauty of symbol lies in the complex associations, personal and mythic, embedded in each image. These reach far beyond the conscious intent of any author, expanding the dimensions of a story, yet personalizing the experience for each hearer, reader, or member of the audience.

Borrowing a term from Dr. John Weir Perry, Joseph Campbell described mythological archetypes as “affect-images” - which speak to heart, not head.

What Campbell did was to think in images. That's something different than thinking scientifically or logically. And Campbell opened this up – this question of images. I think that's the most important thing he did. That's why there are so many images in his books. Not only visual images of cave paintings or of statues or of goddesses and gods and so on, but poetic images, and if there had been a chance, probably musical images as well ...

- James Hillman, "This Question of Images," *Saga*, (ed. Jonathan Young), p. 16

In Campbell's own words, "For me, myth is primarily visual."

Hillman also approves of Campbell's ability to relate his work to popular culture. Mythology is not reserved for the halls of academia alone. A myth is nothing more than a quaint, disembodied abstraction locked away in a book in the absence of people to partake of its magic; myths **need** people if they are to come to life.

By paying attention to all levels of culture, Campbell is able to chart changes in the creative imagination. For example, the appearance of the novel, a literary innovation often traced to Lady Murasaki Shikibu's The Tale of Genji in eleventh century Japan, paralleled broad changes in cultures throughout the world.

Campbell wonders if modern movies might signal a further evolution of forms:

I see Lucas continuing a major concern of modern life and shifting from the world of literate minds to the popular masses who seem to me to be running the world. It's [as] though the spark had left the easel and writer's pen and jumped into the camera.

- Joseph Campbell, interviewed by D.J.R. Bruckner "Seventy Years of Making Connections," *The New York Times Book Review*, 1983

But then Campbell's influence does not stop at the popcorn counter. James Hillman takes the discussion of images past the marquis and out into the future:

This movement to thinking in images is part of the movement of our times, because we are going to stop reading linear sentences – one that follows another, and will be watching video screens with three or four images in them, juxtaposing images. Kids are already doing that. Therefore the value of Campbell's work is his laying out the richness of images that people will need to use for truly deep images rather than Nintendo games. We'll have an information highway where you sit at your own monitor and you will be able to create a whole world of imagery – paintings and architecture,

symbols, ruins. All the museums will be available. A kind of pioneer nucleus of that is the great intellectual and educational value of Campbell's work and his collection.

- *Hillman, in Saga, p.17*

Hillman offered these remarks in 1995 – before the nascent internet experienced the explosive growth that has brought us to where we are today – and Campbell lived his entire life without ever receiving an email or venturing into cyberspace – yet Hillman's observations ring eerily prophetic. Even surfing the web at random it's not unusual to stumble across evidence of Campbell's influence in the most unlikely of places.

Movies, video games, computers, and the internet all rely on image – which has ever been the basic construct of myth. We find the same mythological motifs surfacing in these developing technologies as in ancient mythologies, albeit in fresh configurations and novel relationships – nor should it be surprising that we also find many of the creative talents involved in these fields conceding Campbell's influence.

And so, poised on the edge of the future, we return to the original question:

Are the movies – and other elements of popular culture – a proper medium for myth?

So you see, it's one thing to get the old structure of the hero myth, but now they are pitching it out into the void, where it's possible to let the imagination go.

- *Joseph Campbell, discussing movies in **The Bloomsbury Review**, 1984*

The answer is likely yes – but it's not your grandfather's idea of myth anymore ...