MODERN MYTHOLOGY

BY SABINE LEITNER

Alexander Consulting the Oracle of Apollo, by Louis-Jean-Francois Lagrenee

Introduction

Despite their universal existence in all civilizations and all times of history, myths have often been scoffed at and regarded as old wives tales. August Comte, the founder of positivism and sociology, relegated myths to the most early and primitive level of intellectual evolution and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, a French philosopher, associated myth with pre-logical mentality common to the most primitive stages of mankind. This implies that in our day and age, we should have long grown out of this primitive mentality and should reject anything that is beyond sense experience and the clear light of reason. So how is it possible, then, that myths still capture our imagination, that elves and dragons still exert their fascination, that *Lord of the Rings* was allegedly, apart from the Bible, the most read book of the 20th century and that JK Rowling is the best earning

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author ever in the whole of history? How can it be explained that *Star Wars* has so far inspired 3 generations, that *Harry Potter* is enjoyed by children and adults alike, that people are watching films like *The Matrix* over and over again and that *Lord of the Rings* has attracted an incredibly diverse following across all age groups, from Oxford Professors to Hippies to Middle Class Catholics?

The Myth is Dead! Long Live the Myth!

Mythology is still alive and always will be. Since the earliest times, man has used symbols and myths to express his experience of a reality that transcends the physical world, and to pass it on to future generations. Every people in history has had their myths and some of them are still well-known today: the Epic of Gilgamesh, the myth of Isis and Osiris, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Heike Monogatari,* the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Plato's myths, the legends of Saints, the *Edda*, the *Kalevala*, the myths of King Arthur and his knights, the *Chanson de Roland* and many more. The 19th and the 20th centuries saw a steady revival of myths in art, music, literature and film: *Wagner's Ring*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter*, *Dune* to name but a few. This resurgence of mythical elements also led to the collection, classification and interpretation of myths and finally to the established study of comparative mythology.

The German anthropologist Adolph Bastian (1826-1905) was the first to propose the idea that myths

from all over the world seem to be built from the same "elementary ideas." The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) named these elementary ideas "archetypes," which he believed to be the building blocks not only of the unconscious mind, but also of a collective unconscious. Jung believed that all human beings are born with the same basic subconscious archetypes such as the "hero", the "king" or the "quest".

In the second half of the 20th century it became more widely understood that myths are something universal with a universal function. In 1949 Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) wrote his revolutionary book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, in which he argues that all stories are fundamentally the same story, which he named the "Hero's Journey", or the "monomyth." In his book he provides examples from cultures throughout history and all over the world and shows the common underlying structure behind religion and myth. He concluded that all religions are mere containers for the same essential truths and that "All religions are true, but none are literal."

Common Universal Elements in Modern Myths

Battle between Good and Evil
In many myths, two factions are fighting each other. An ancient example is the *Bhagavad Gita*, with the *Pandavas* versus the *Kuravas*; modern examples are the Fellowship of the Ring against the dark forces of Mordor and Harry Potter versus Voldemort. In *The Matrix* human beings fight against the machines and in *Star Wars* it is the Planet side versus the Death Star. In all these cases the theme is power. The evil ones want power for themselves (Sauron is animated by a "will to dominate all life") and show no respect for individual lives, whereas the good ones successfully resist the greed for power and base their power on the power over themselves.

The Hero
He is the main character of the story and has a special mission to fulfill. His nature is both human
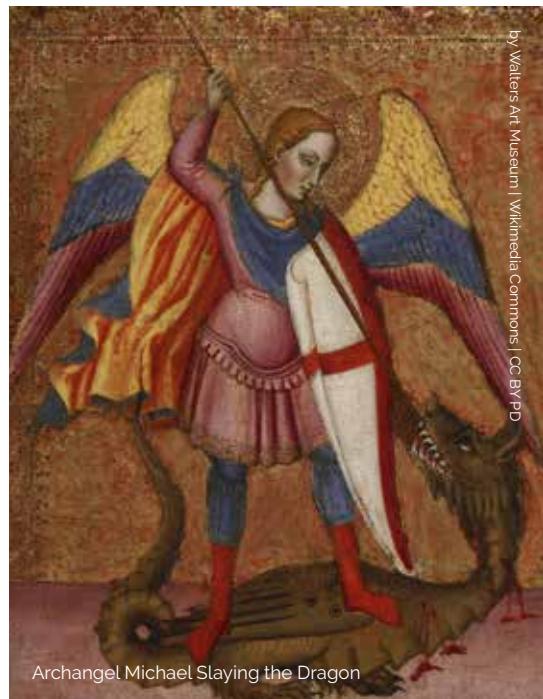
Archangel Michael Slaying the Dragon

and special and in Greek mythology this double nature was expressed by the hero being almost always a demi-god, having one human and one divine parent. But the specialness of Harry Potter, Frodo, Luke Skywalker, Neo and Paul Atreides (from *Dune*) also means that it is their destiny to go through many dangers and pass many trials. In the course of their mission they often nearly die, but they also discover their inner strengths and develop their inner potential.

The Master or Mentor
Examples: Dumbledore, Gandalf, Obi-wan Kenobi, Yoda, Morpheus, etc. Every hero has a master or mentor. The master is aware of the potentialities inside the young hero and acts as his teacher and guide. He prepares the hero for his task and reminds him of the virtues he has to develop if he wants to be successful. The master usually knows the truth or knows much more about the wider context of the mission and helps his charge to gradually realize the truth for himself and to free himself from all illusions.

The Prophecy

In many myths there is a prophecy regarding the hero. It is either a prophecy that helps to identify the hero, such as in the myth of King Arthur where the person who could pull out the sword from the stone was to be the future king. Or it is a prophecy that reveals the mission and the destiny of the hero. In *Star Wars* it is said that Luke will overthrow the emperor. In *The Matrix* the prophecy says that Morpheus will find the "The One" who will be able to liberate mankind and that Trinity will fall in love with him. Harry Potter gradually discovers the prophecy about his link with Voldemort. In *Dune* the Bene Gesserit have a prophecy about a Kwisatz Haderach (a person who will "jump forward" in the evolution of mankind) and the Fremen have a prophecy about a new messiah.

The Mission

The hero always has a dangerous mission to fulfill that affects the destiny of all of mankind. In modern myths it is always about overcoming evil in one way or another. Frodo has to destroy the "one ring that binds them all", Harry Potter must overcome Voldemort, Luke Skywalker must overthrow the evil Emperor, and Neo must pave the way to liberate the others from the slavery of the machines.

Temptation

One of the tests the hero has to undergo is temptation. Luke is tempted by the dark side, Frodo is tempted by the power of the ring, Harry Potter is tempted to use magic in the muggle world and Cypher (the failed messiah in *The Matrix*) has succumbed to the world of comfortable illusions.

Self-mastery, Character Building, Developing of Virtues

All heroic characters need to learn to control themselves and to gain power over themselves. The young heroes have to learn to control their temper and their actions. They also have to learn to overcome fear. A brilliant example is in *Dune*, where Paul Atreides has to control his fear of pain by having his fingers burnt in a box and at the same time a

poisonous needle held to his neck that would prick him at the slightest movement of fear.

The hero also has to learn to control his mind: Luke Skywalker has to master his mind in order to master the Force, Harry Potter has to take lessons in Occlumency in order to prevent Voldemort from reading his own mind. All heroes have to develop courage, perseverance, hope, love, compassion, team spirit, concentration, discernment, intuition etc. because these are their only real "weapons" in the fight against the dark forces.

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All these elements have been in stories for thousands of years. What keeps them alive is on the one hand a universal truth that shines through them, and on the other hand their re-interpretation and re-contextualization. Often, a modern myth is mostly a resurgence of a much older myth, as we shall see in the following example.

The Matrix, a modern version of Plato's Myth of the Cave

The cult film The Matrix (not taking into account its two sequels) is in many ways a modern version of Plato's Myth of the Cave and the Eastern concept of Maya.

Here is a short summary of the story in *The Matrix: The Matrix* is about a time in the future when science has managed to create such highly intelligent artificial machines that they wage war against humans and nearly terminate the race. All cities on earth are totally destroyed and the few survivors take refuge in an underground city named Zion. The war has devastated the entire biosphere

and the only way for the machines to survive is to use the bio-energy produced by the human body. So they raise human beings like crops and in order to keep them alive they "plug in" their minds into a massive computer-generated virtual reality called the "Matrix", so that humans are comfortably tricked into believing that everything is as it was hundreds of years ago (i.e. in the year 2001).

In Plato's *Myth of the Cave*, written almost 2,400 years ago in his famous book *The Republic*, he describes men being held captive in a cave and made to believe that the shadows they see in front of them and the echoes they can hear are the real reality. This concept of "what our eyes see is not reality" is also reminiscent of the Eastern concept of *maya*, the illusion that constitutes our ever-changing physical world and prevents all human beings from perceiving the eternal truth.

In the film, the Matrix (the computer generated virtual reality) is *maya*, the illusion. We are in its grip, yet unaware of our bondage.

In both the *Myth of the Cave* and *The Matrix*, someone appears who frees himself from these fetters and is capable of penetrating through this deceptive world. He then undertakes the mission of showing the truth to the rest and trying to liberate the human race. In the Matrix, there is already a group of people who have recognized the truth about the matrix and the leader of this group is Morpheus. He is looking for the one person who will have extraordinary powers and will pave the road to freedom for all. He believes it is Neo, who is completely unaware of his potential and this task.

The entire first sequel of *The Matrix* describes the discovery of Neo and the effort to convince him of his capabilities in the face of immense struggle against the forces of the illusionary world. Morpheus is the master or guru and Neo is his disciple. It is the task of the master to guide the disciple and prepare him for the realization of the truth.

In one scene, Morpheus says to Neo:
Morpheus: I'm trying to free your mind, Neo, but I can only show you the door, you're the one that has to walk through it… You have to let it all go, Neo, fear, doubt, and disbelief. Free your mind.
In the film there is a dialogue where Morpheus explains the Matrix to Neo.
Morpheus: Do you want to know what IT is? The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out of your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from truth.
Neo: What truth?
Morpheus: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind…

In another scene Morpheus' words are reminiscent of the classical idea that can be found in several philosophical texts of East and West: that our world is like a dream and that only by waking up will we be able to see the real world.
Morpheus: Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?

On another occasion Morpheus tells Neo:
Morpheus: What is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.
In order to be able to see reality as it is, Neo has to go through the process of being "unplugged" from the wires that are connected to his body. These wires that are connected to Neo's body are similar to our senses, which only show us a small window of reality and imprison our mind. Plato also describes the process of gradually coming to terms with the
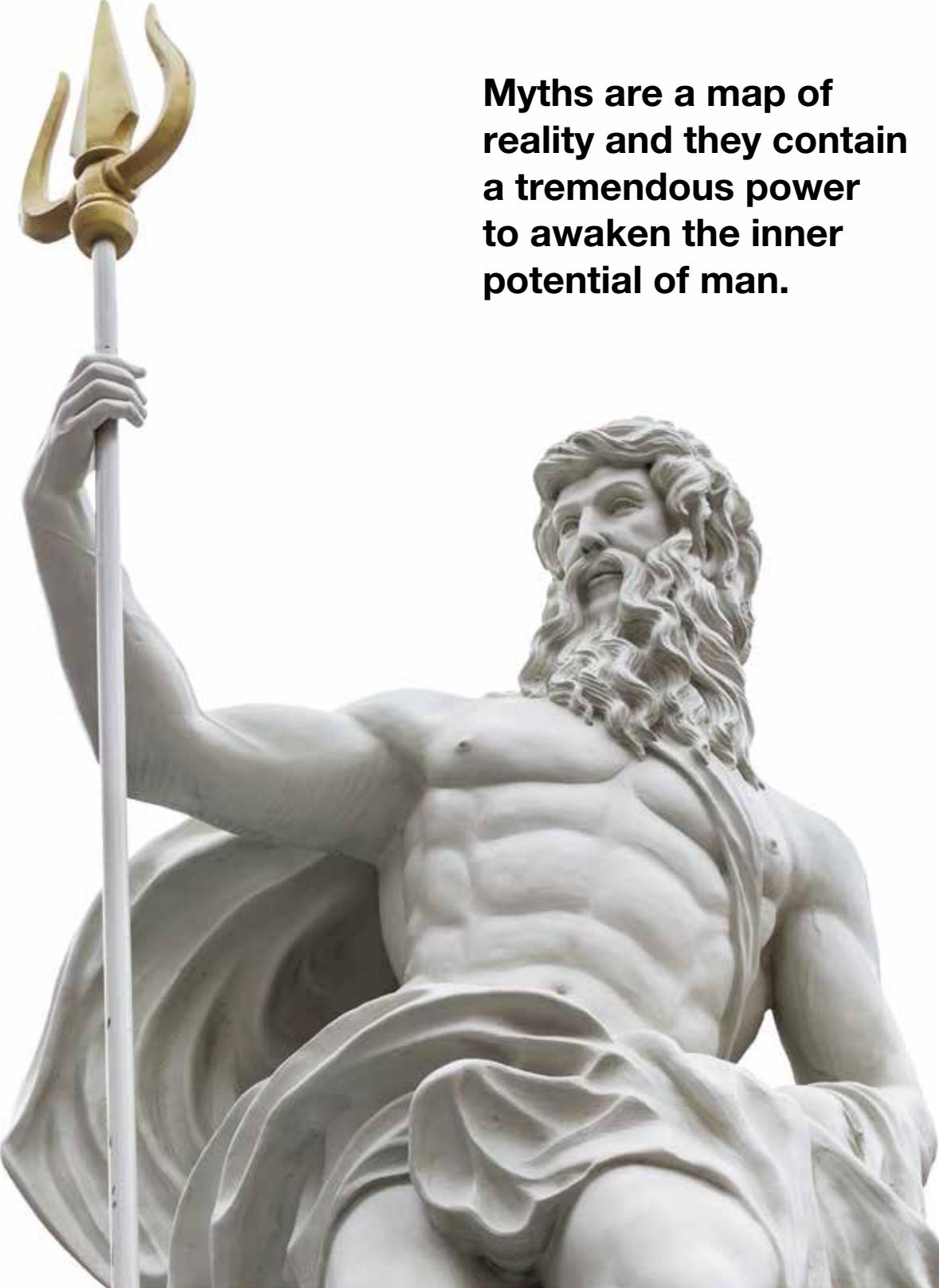
Myths are a map of reality and they contain a tremendous power to awaken the inner potential of man.

truth as a painful process.

Neo's reaction, when he is exposed to this truth, is therefore understandable:

Neo: No. I don't believe it. It's not possible.

Morpheus: I didn't say it would be easy, Neo. I just said it would be the truth.

It is interesting to see how both stories describe a similar human reaction in face of the truth. We are so used to our familiar prison of the sensory world that unreality appears real to us and truth loses its meaning. We also have a deeply ingrained fear of waking up and would, indeed, rather fight to protect our wrong notions.

In the *Myth of the Cave*, Plato describes what happens to the philosopher who, having managed to free himself from his chains, emerge from the cave and discover the truth, goes back again into the cave to free his fellow-prisoners. Plato writes that they would not believe the philosopher and would ridicule him, and if they could lay hands on him, they would kill him.

The Matrix describes a similar situation:

Morpheus: The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you're inside, you look around. What do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still a part of that system, and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it.

This has always been (and probably will be for a long time in the future) the drama of the philosopher. The list of those in history who have been ridiculed, exiled, martyred or killed for telling the truth is long indeed.

It is understandable that the Matrix is such a successful film. It touches upon questions that have gripped the minds of the greatest thinkers in history; it contains all the elements of a myth and is in many ways a science-fiction version of a much older and very famous myth.

The Value of Myths

Myths are universal and have several universal functions. One of Joseph Campbell's messages is that 'mythic structure' is more than the underlying archetype of a good story: myth teaches us how to live well. Tolkien wrote that myth and fairytale (two terms he used interchangeably) seem to be the best way to communicate morality and that they prepare the reader to make the same heroic journey in their own life.

Bruno Bettelheim states in his classic study of children's literature *The Uses of Enchantment* that "more can be learned from fairy tales about the inner problems of human beings and the right solutions to their predicaments than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension". Mircea Eliade, the great historian of religions, wrote that "every rite, every myth, every belief reflects the experience of the sacred and hence implies the notions of being, of meaning, and of truth."

Jorge Angel Livraga said once in a lecture: "When the Greeks created their myths, they weren't telling lies. They were creating psychological tools for the development of the inner being of man." Myths are not lies; they are containers of meta-historical realities…

What are these meta-historical realities? Among other things they are the inner forces that drive the actions of men, such as greed, thirst for power, selfishness, but also love, compassion and the need to realize our inner potential. As long as these forces exist, there will also exist a battle between good and evil within ourselves. We also carry within ourselves the archetypes that are expressed in myths and symbols. Thus, all myths carry a message for our own lives and teach us how to cope with life.

The hero in myths is a role model for us and we always need role models in all areas of our lives. A role model is a point of reference, and gives us direction like a star in the sky. A role model carries the identity we want to acquire and enables us to project ourselves into the future. The model of the hero is, thus, a fundamental key to the evolution of man and, as Livraga said, a psychological tool for the development of the inner being of man. The message of the hero is that one can succeed and it awakens our intuitive feeling that we contain as yet unrealized potential.

The Need for Modern Myths

Joseph Campbell noted that every generation must recontextualize myth to suit their times and to create their own road map for how to fit into the world. He often suggested that the scarcity of modern myth is an incalculable loss to our culture. J.R.R. Tolkien was also aware of this and wanted to create a modern myth with Lord of the Rings.

J.A. Livraga believed that man without myths, heroes, beauty and the sacred would turn into a humanoid and lose his capacity to project his hopes into the future and create cultural forms that would allow the possibility of living a meaningful life.

Myths are a map of reality and they contain a tremendous power to awaken the inner potential of man. Without myths we would lack this valuable map of reality and lack the great inspiration to discover our inner potential. The mass appeal of Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and others shows exactly this: that we need the heroes of the myths to inspire us and to aspire to. ★★★

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The Pandava and Kaurava armies face each other

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