

# Myth, Mind and Meaning in New Media

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A myth is a traditional story with supernatural elements. A myth often explains the origins of certain psychological, physical and natural phenomena. Myths, their details and meanings, allow people to see and perhaps understand the nuances and complexities of life. Myths also reveal to us how the imagination could bring together existential form and abstract form into a single reality of separate orders.

Today's human conditions are highly mediated and the ubiquities of our technological devices ferry us between spectacle and reason, between aesthetics and intellection. In engaging this distance, both our imagination and positive knowledge turn to myth again.

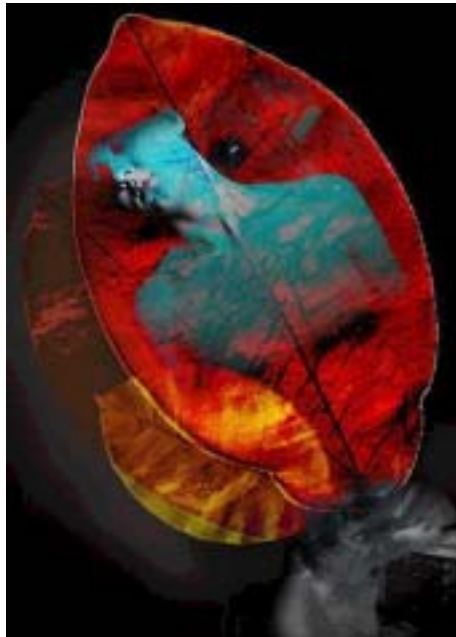
In "The Story of Lynx", Claude Levi-Strauss points to myth as the earliest science of speculating the origins and maturation of the world, and how today, scientific breakthroughs and their limitations spur our dialogue with science to make mythological thinking actual again.

In "Artful Science", Barbara Stafford suggests putting the Enlightenment's demonstration of pleasurable learning back into thinking with images, calling for a "democratic hermeneutics of pattern recognition and visual design."

The tensions and contradictions regarding visual technology, rooted in the nature of what we currently call "new media", may have found the grammar for discourse in Lev Manovich's "Language of New Media." The modularity, variability and algorithmic manipulation of new media and the influence of the machine's ontology, epistemology and pragmatics on culture may partly account for what Stafford saw as the turmoil in visibility, the tension between truth and deception, and "the artist as cheating in the production of well-crafted work."

While Manovich presents a language based on the con-

ceptual lens of cinema under which new media may be seen, Stafford's twenty-first century Re-enlightenment offers fresh ideas for those caught in the eclipse of modern visual culture. And there are those of us who had always seen pedagogical opportunities as inherent in oral-visual culture, and the way machines render abstractions concrete as mere examples of our "primitive" mythological way of thinking.



*Figure 1. Alan Sondheim's Gimokud by Camilo Quevedo.*

I started looking at new media through the conceptual world of myths and their meanings upon observing the pattern of how new media is used to create new imaginative worlds of meaning. Although as an artist, the use of myths themselves figure prominently in my work and collaborations with other people, it was through this practice did I begin to appreciate the significance of myth-making and the archetype as critical concepts that may be used in apprehending new media and new media art practices.

In this paper, I will present three examples of new media undertakings wherein the use of myths

in motivating contemporary imagery and discourse is significant.

In closing, I will present the use of the Ifugao myth of the divided child in analysing the dynamics of cross-disciplinary work by three practitioners in new media.

"Gimokud, the Melting Soul" is the title of a web-based exhibition of collaborative digital works by thirty-two artists visualizing the souls of twenty-three participants from ten different countries. The on-line exhibition, completed in February 14, 2001, presents fifty-two digital works, each one a visualization of the ancient Philippine myth of the interrupted existence of the soul.

According to the myth, the soul, or gimokud, goes about its customary existence at night, and at the rising of the sun, plucks a leaf, twists it into a vessel suggesting

the form of a boat, and seats itself upon it, waiting until the hot rays of the sun dissolve it into water. Only when darkness spreads over the land of the dead, does the gimokud resume its active existence.

In Gimokud, participants uploaded their souls, digital images of their existence, and digital images of objects that they would bring with them if they were to travel as a gimokud. The recipient of their images would then create the leaf vessel upon which their gimokud would reside.

I call the Gimokud an “Internet soul project” because first, it was conducted entirely through the Internet - the exchange of texts, images and ideas were done through Internet email and web-based forms; and, second, because Gimokud is a project that investigated the dynamics of identity, the avatar, in virtual space.

The project, with the soul as its center, required trust and mutual cooperation between the participants for its completion. The participants in the project would have to put their souls into the hands of strangers from across virtual space to craft the leaf vessels of their interrupted existence. In Gimokud, cyberspace may well be the “Great Country,” a “mythical situation quite in accordance with the common primitive concepts touching the souls” of humans, animals and inanimate objects. In Gimokud, we saw how closely myth and the Internet flow into each other and how myths play out their avatars untiringly in cyberspace.

The binaries of existence in the virtual and physical world put new media and myth closely together. Many of the operations in the virtual world are extensions of our physical apprehension of objects and processes. In “The Power of Myth”, Joseph Campbell holds that myth is the power of metaphor and poetry; the myth itself, while literally false, is metaphorically true. Our navigation in virtual space is rooted in a shared my-



Figure 2. Images from “Ethermorph.”

thology, a universal archetypal stream from collective human experience that enables the metaphor to serve its functions. The tactile cognitive and graphical interfaces of our technological devices are all metaphors of our mundane physical world existence; these interfaces are the veils behind which the machine and its machinic language operate.

This relationship between matter and insensible prototypes is explored in another web-based new media work entitled “Ethermorph: The Shaman Acquires Her Powers through Initiation.” The web installation derives from a physical exhibition entitled “Machinelanguage.”

“Ethermorph” was a term used in the early nineties to refer to the problematic persistent caching of Internet web sites in old web browsers. The browsers morphed websites previously visited with those currently in view, making the delivery of information garbled and inaccurate. As new browsers were developed the problem was solved.

In the work “Ethermorph”, digital photographs of guests at the opening of the exhibition were taken and transformed into digital depictions of shamanic initiation rites, mostly an image morphing technique. The process of morphing the person with his or her mirror image is also a symbol of self-absorption, typical of shamanic initiations. The results were fifteen digital images of the invisible made visible presented as a web-based installation.

In “The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography”, Robert Duncan describes the myth-teller muttering against his willful lips a story that forces his telling. Duncan describes the shaman, who takes the universe to be alive, as a mystic and a paranoiac; a totally informed being whose world is a world of meanings. In Ethermorph, the shaman is archetype for the wired man in the electronic age, perhaps the man whose central nervous system, as

Marshall McLuhan offers in his “Agenbite of Outwit,” is extended across the globe. The idolatry of technology, the enchantment without intellection, renders a psychic numbness, unless we have the shaman, the psychotic, the healer of ancient societies, showing us, as in the words of McLuhan, “ways of living with new technology without destroying earlier forms and achievements.”

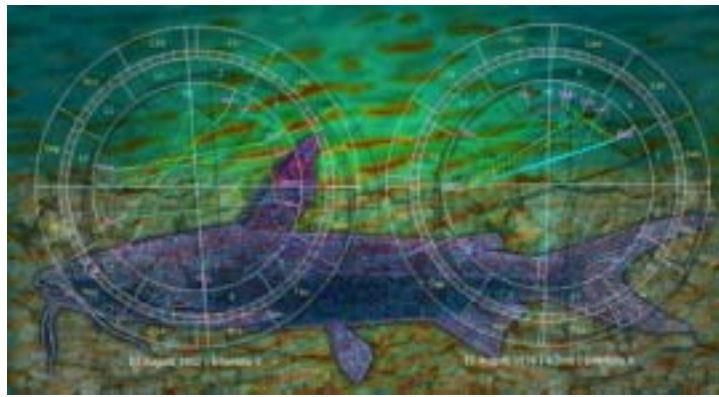


Figure 3. “Heaven and Earth: 21 August 1902 Intensity X | 15 August 1918 Intensity X” by Fatima Lasay.

I see this today as a kind of new humanism pointed out by David Cave in “Mircea Eliade’s Vision for a New Humanism.” The modern person, Cave holds, when informed by exemplary models and archetypes, will constitute a modern culture of a plural, universal, wholistic and cosmic presence in the world. Social fragmentation and individual alienation are too often seen in tow with our advancing technologies, with our dazzling graphic displays, such that only through a syncretist mythological basis, we may bring about the structure and meaning we seek in our highly mediated and fractured world.

The electronic age has also given us tools by which information could be visualized in a variety of ways that make sense to us. This naturally rendered information visualization tools and the other new media technologies involved as bridges between disciplines that seem completely unrelated. In “Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths”, Lawrence J. Hatab argues that the strict separation between myth and logic is ultimately untenable, saying that there is logic in myth, a coherence and form. Hatab argues that “even our age of extensive objectification, quantification, and mechanization can be seen to be guided by certain mythical motifs.” The accessibility of our technologies opens the potential for cross-disciplinary work in the arts more than ever before.

In a new media project entitled “Geocentricity, the Earth as Center,” we have artists engage the geological sciences and new media technologies.

Geocentricity was commissioned and hosted by fineArt forum and is now part of the Leonardo Gallery. In the web-based exhibition, seven Filipino digital artists

presented thirteen visions of earth phenomena and the mythologies that make order of its unpredictable and dynamic system. The artists interpreted their visions using scientific and cultural data.

Meeting with scientists at the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology provided both art and science practitioners a cross-examination of the various disciplines that would be engaged in the completion of the project. Laboratory type experimentations that visualize and predict natural phenomena to enable understanding and communication, serve also as ground for discovery, creativity, synthesis, representation and the apprehension of invisible or inaccessible phenomena. The art-science relationship here becomes obvious.

As the most seemingly disparate disciplines continue to melt into each other via the transcoding of information in new media, we turn to mythological thinking if we are to approach these developments with imaginal receptivity. For instance, in the design of electronic interfaces or the construction of web-based installations, my interest is in how access to reality is conducted when sensible form and immaterial nuances are addressed, not merely transcoded, by new media. We can approach this with the mindset of the rationalist full in the language of cybernetics but typified by sterility of meaning. Or, alternatively, as in the words of Ananda Coomaraswamy, “seeing things material and sensible a formal likeness to spiritual prototypes of which the senses can give no direct report.”

In “The Door in the Sky”, Coomaraswamy holds that the practice of an art is not traditionally a secular activity nor a matter of affective “inspiration”, but rather a metaphysical rite. Thus, as no distance is drawn between art and contemplation, “it is not only the first images that are formally of superhuman origin.” Further, Coomaraswamy defines the judgement of an image as a contemplation “and as such can only be consummated in an assimilation. A transformation of our nature is required.” As mythical constructs immediately generate their opposites, this

transformation through assimilation may be seen in the archetype of the divided child.

In Philippine Ifugao culture, there is a myth that speaks of this “divided child,” the offspring of parents from heaven and earth. Born and raised in the Benguet Province, the day finally comes when this child, named Ovug, is beckoned to the skyworld. The people of Benguet refuse to give up the child, and so the child’s father, the god Dumagid, takes a knife and divides the child into equal parts - one part for the heavens and the other for the earth. Both parts are also to receive new life to account for the voices of lightning in the sky and thunder rolling across the earth. This magnificent light and sound display is the orchestration of the divided child, to the delight of the ear and eye

This is the myth and tradition by which I see the process of collaboration and the role of the artist as a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural worker - as Ovug, the divided child. There is a critical metempsychosis, the splitting and transmigration of souls, in Ovug, as he is conceived from both sky and earth and is split bodily into two separate beings. Similarly, in the artist’s movement from individual to collaborator, the identity is divided and whatever constitutes a personality is transfigured or relinquished. Furthermore, both entities must, like thunder and lightning, act as a single symposium of light and sound.

But true to the complexities of the collaborative process and cross-disciplinary practice in the arts, the myth of the divided child does not begin and end in a mere “severe and multiply” affair. On his first return to the skyworld, Dumagid was forced to bring along his wife, Dugai, and leave their child as security for their return. It meant to surrender Ovug and to sacrifice Dugai as no human can bear the path to the skyworld. Creative collaboration can also be so goal-blind as to make that uncalculated risk that delivers and consumes the eros and exigency in the creative process; cross-study in the arts may mean threading unfamiliar terrain (or the extra-terra) and a surrender of inherited powers.



Figure 4. “Asuang Steals Fire from Gurugang” by Al Manrique.

In conversations with visual artist Noell El Farol, the courageous Dugai, who takes the perilous path with Dumagid skyward, figures prominently in Noell’s undertaking of an archeological sound recording of ancient burial sites entitled “Hukay.” Himself engaged in archeological studies, Noell works in collaboration with experts in the field. “Hukay” is an expedition into eliciting conversations and channeling signals, between the living and the dead, between past and future.

Recently, I invited Noell Farol and Roberto Feleo, both colleagues at the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts, to collaborate on an archaeology-new media installation entitled “Artifact Reassembly.” We thought of the new media and archaeology link with the view that as new media technologies become important mediums and processes in artistic work, there is a need to perceive and wield them with a clarified understanding of how ideologies are carried by media and technological waves. Theories evolved from different disciplines now migrate into each other with increasing speed and acceptance as technology provides the interfaces for interdisciplinarity. Our framework was that as human cognition is inferred from lithic industries, human evolution became linked with cultural and technological evolution in what is seen as a biocultural feedback system. In a highly mediated culture, artists now need to be aware of what accounts for stability and patterns of change in society. In “Artifact Reassembly,” the artifact is not a fossilized bone of ancient traditions, but a re-living and re-creation of what has been distilled and passed on; it is Dugai resurrected.

Back to the Ifugao myth, it is said that Dumagid met his future wife while on a solitary walk in the forest. For the cross-practitioner, one is likely to meet new strategies of merging diverse disciplines while treading on transcendental ground and allowing one’s self to be “carried in by love.” The eventual marriage of music and math took place for Rowena Guevara, chairperson of the Department of Electronics and Electrical Engineering in UP. Gev explained to me that “on the surface, engineering contributes a lot to the music - acoustics,

recording, synthesis and analysis, just to mention a few.” On a deeper level, Gev believes that “making music is a form of engineering. It involves design (conceptualizing the theme, form, instrumentation and so on), initial implementation (writing the music), simulation (trying out the music on a keyboard), iteration (re-writing the music) and final implementation (performance or recording of the music).” Actual mythical thinking enables us to see these relationships at non-superficial levels.

Of course, in the myth there is the phenomenon of Dumagid cutting his own child in half. In 1979, visual artist Al Manrique was assigned to document depressed areas of Samar, Leyte and the urban squatters of Cebu. When I met with him three years ago, Al had embarked on the digitization of negatives that comprise twenty years of photography. He had also started work on his “Latay” series of digital images. In “Latay,” like Dumagid, who willingly divides the body to let one half dwell in the skyworld and the other, the earth, Al Manrique takes on the open source model of authorship as he invites others to join him in the “digital soiree of creating art beyond documents.” “Latay” comes from hundreds of negatives, documents of an era, developed and stored under the most unforgiving conditions, that now beg to be restored, a process which may take Al another lifetime to accomplish. Unless, of course, Ovug divided is re-animated in the spirit of collaborative work, to digitize the negatives into their mutable and endlessly reproducible counterparts, and so others may use them in the creation of even more visual forms.

The myth of the divided child is not a single bolt of lightning or clap of thunder, a game or story that has ended in the sky. As Claude Levi-Strauss said in “The Story of Lynx,” we should not think that myths can only offer us already-played-out-games. Myths are untiring; they begin a new game each time they are retold or read, enacted or seen. Through the “primitive” eyes of myth, there is more than logic or tradition along which art is daily creating new meanings, more than



Figure 5. Video image from DMF2002's "Artifact Reassembly."

parallels to modern technological breakthroughs, or synthetic philosophical reflection.

Looking at computers and digital and electronic media from an historical perspective, I am reminded of something called “Memex”, a concept proposed by Vannevar Bush in the essay “As We May Think.” “As We May Think” was published in

1945, just after the Second World War, and it introduced a conceptual device, “Memex”, supposedly the first of what were called “pacific instruments” that American scientists claimed to be their primary objective upon emerging from their destructive work during the war. “Memex” was the conceptual model for what is known today as the desktop computer and the infrastructure of the information age; it was “an enlarged and intimate supplement to [human] memory.” Essentially, it was a prosthetic device, an extension and augmentation of the human brain.

Today’s “Memex”, being thus modelled after “the way we think”, has created an overwhelming world of new meanings and situations such that our discussions of them open altogether new didactic and epistemological problems.

In her book “Artful Science”, Barbara Stafford paints an age of “automatic simulations and mechanized knack” in late twentieth century developments; she paints a western world’s eclipse in visuality in the face of their orientalized technology. Here, Stafford calls for the need to reassociate visual technologies with common rituals and public concerns.

I think this is a turn to mythological thinking, a turn which in the Asian experience is a mere turn to the groom in our bedside.

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