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Roundtable: Heroes, Gods, and Myths: The Myths That We Create and How They Create Us

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Abstract
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In the space below, John Ebert, John Izod, and Samuel Brunk give us their definitions of, and thoughts on, myths, religion, and heroes. The juxtaposition of their answers allows for a diverse and multi-faceted understanding of myths that cuts across disciplines and media. Ultimately, their responses emphasize our need to shape stories that define us and help us deal with our own mortality.

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Roundtable

Heroes, Gods, and Myths: The Myths That We Create and How They Create Us

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  John David Ebert
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  John Izod
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  Sam Brunk

What is myth? What is the most powerful myth you encounter in your research?

> **John Ebert:** Myth is the psyche's means of stabilizing itself in response to changes made in the immediate environment. As a species, humans have been inflicting changes upon their cultural environments since the days of the Paleolithic, and the primary means of inflicting these changes is, of course, through the introduction of new technologies. Every new technology, no matter how innocuous, whether it is a new type of tool or a process of doing something, creates a new environment and also fragments and splinters our faculties into very specialized modalities. Myth is produced — spontaneously, not deliberatively — as an attempt to recover the whole, integral human being after technology has split him asunder through specialization.
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> It is difficult to say what I think the most powerful myth is in my research since there are so many good ones, but I will tell you what my favorite myth is and why: The Epic of Gilgamesh. Here we have our first example of a myth that is produced as a direct response to the problems of living in an urban

society, the world's first urban society, in fact.
The city which Gilgamesh was from, Uruk, was one of the oldest cities in the world. The story of Gilgamesh proper concerns a weary king who is disillusioned not so much with life in general, as with life lived specifically in a city. He is tired of the duties and constraints which the sacred laws of the city impose upon him, and so he is in rebellion against them. The city's priesthood, which centered on the cult of the goddess Inanna, is forever attempting to rein him in and make him perform his duties in the Sacred Marriage which would make him subordinate to the will of the goddess, but he will have none of that. In revenge, the goddess, who is the patron deity of the city of Uruk and so represents its will, strikes his friend Enkidu down with a debilitating illness and causes Gilgamesh to leave the city behind forever. Like the Buddha, and also like Christ, Gilgamesh renounces civic life, together with its political and religious constraints, for good. For it is precisely his failure to comply
with the constraints of tradition sanctified by the city's priesthood that led to the death of his best friend. So Gilgamesh goes out beyond the pale of the city to wander in the wasteland like some archaic Mad Max figure, and goes in quest of a religious experience that will have the effect of integrating him with the macrocosmic rhythms. The city, in other words, has failed to provide him with the proper religious experience because by Gilgamesh's day it was corrupt and decadent. So, in this myth, which is the first of its kind and after which many other such myths will be patterned, Gilgamesh goes out into the cosmos and wanders amongst the stars and constellations of the zodiac in order to find the great religious experience that will restore his integrality, the very integrality which life in the city had denied to him as a result of all its specialist fragmentations.

John Izod: It depends on whom you ask. Let's disregard the common usage of the term to describe something that is merely a wrongly believed commonplace. Nevertheless, the idea of falsehood still attaches to a significant point of view which associates myth with the power of state and capital to dupe pleasurably those whom it catches in its net. This is Roland Barthes's Marxist thesis in 'Myth Today' (1970). He argued that contemporary myths evacuate history of its factual basis so as to give priority to the connotation that things have always been, and will continue to be, governed by unchanging values. For Barthes, myth was invariably a mechanism which concealed the bitter truths of dominant ideology and as such masked the consequences of imperialist politics and capitalist economics from a well-deceived public.

An altogether different perspective has been adopted by Jungians. They see myths as contributing to the regulation and balancing of the psychic system – both individual and transpersonal. For them, myths are eloquent expressions of psychological patterns which have healing potential because they can make available to consciousness buried urges, fears and delights and thus enhance the psychological wellbeing of the individual. As myths are by definition stories that gain the willing assent of many people and are held in common, they permit a degree of insight into the hidden currents of more than the individual psyche alone. They arise from and in turn stimulate impulses activated in the unconscious of large numbers of people. Since they express the concerns (whether verbalised or not) of many people, myths are also a means by which both individuals and communities strengthen their sense of identity.

The dominant myth encountered in my work on American cinema is that of hero simply because, marketed into populist U.S. culture, Hollywood product is still deeply wed to it.

Samuel Brunk: My working definition of myth is intentionally broad and simple, taken from an old dictionary: a myth is a "traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon." One important aspect of this definition is that it does not exclude the possibility that elements of a myth might be historically accurate. Indeed, it is difficult to separate mythical and historical stories precisely.

My work is on one myth, in particular, the myth of Emiliano Zapata that emerged from the Mexican Revolution. I wouldn't say that it's the most powerful myth I know of (the myth of Jesus Christ is

certainly more powerful), but it is certainly the most powerful one my research explores. It draws its power from the fact that it gradually became a creation of substantial political value both on the national level and on myriad local scenes, something that does not always happen with hero cults. As a crucial element of many differently conceptualized communities, it has sometimes become a point of contention between the central government and those who complained of, and opposed the regime.

Are heroes another type of myth? How so?

John Ebert: The short answer to this question is that heroes are simply the protagonists of a myth, any myth, whether it is a folktale, a comic book, or a narrative of religious theogony.
But the long answer splits a few hairs. Your question implies a distinction, I take it, between gods as protagonists of a myth, and heroes, or mere mortals. And there certainly is a valid distinction here. It is very probable that hero myths and myths involving gods were originally two classes of narrative that were kept separate from one another, but that over time, in most traditions, gradually became fused together so that the distinction was blurred. In Egypt, for example, there are two very different classes of story: those dealing with the gods, i.e. Isis, Osiris, Horus, Anubis, etc, and the later secular stories that emerged during the Middle Kingdom like "The Voyage of the Shipwrecked Sailor" or the "Legend of Sinuhe," in which the protagonists are specifically mortals. However, we note that in the later stories from the New Kingdom, such as "The Tale of the Two Brothers," that while the protagonists appear at first glance to be mere mortals, they bear the names of very old divinities, i.e. Bata, an archaic two headed cow goddess from the Old Kingdom, and Anpu, who is essentially Anubis in disguise.

John Izod: They don't have to be, but if they are not personal acquaintances they probably have already been mythologized before you hear about them. Take the case of Jane Tomlinson who has died aged forty-three after fighting vigorously for more than fifteen years against cancer. With no prior experience of sporting events, she embarked on a majestic series of physical challenges to raise funds for charities while undergoing treatment for the disease. She ran three marathons, entered Iron Man contests and cycled across America raising a great deal of money for cancer charities. It is hard to think of anyone who has a stronger claim to being termed a hero. However, amplified by the media attention which was necessary for her fundraising to succeed (she raised in excess of $3 million) she was already a myth in her lifetime.

Jane Tomlinson's life makes a wonderful story both for her own courage and for her contest against a disease that infects most people with terror. In the process of amplification by the media (and it's almost impossible to think that film rights will not be negotiated in due course) the valiant individual's deeds are developed into a compelling narrative of the hero who supplies some of the deepest emotional needs of her community in facing a universal fear.

Samuel Brunk: Yes, hero cults are a category of myth—they are essentially ancestor cults, which have their religious manifestations (cults of saints) and are extremely important in modern nation formation (tombs of unknown soldiers, etc.).

In what ways do myths shape national and/or individual identities? What about heroes?

John Izod: Nationalism – the concept of a united community sited behind the well-defined boundaries that differentiate it from all other nations – is both a myth in its own right and maintained by other myths. The myth of the Polish nation was so strong that it sustained the political will of an entire people during the long years in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to regain the vast territories lost to plundering neighbors that they now once again call their own.

Heroes are frequently mythological agents of national identities. Saint George for England, Saint Patrick for Ireland – the former cast in the image of a warrior, the latter of a missionary. How well they map

onto the broad histories of their nations – the English seldom long away from the battlefront, the Irish rarely committing to wars beyond their own borders.

Samuel Brunk: This is, at least based on my definition, what makes a myth a myth–-that it shapes individual identities, and identities of various communities, including national ones. How that works is ultimately a bit mysterious because there is a chicken and egg element to the story—people produce culture, and culture shapes people. In any case, myths have been a constant presence in human history in part because they serve this function. In the case of hero cults, which I know most about, heroic ancestors have provided models for individuals to follow, models that some might hope will make people more virtuous or productive. Of course, ancestor cults have their origins in families, but when ancestors become shared, because of some special quality, by societies as a whole, they help people imagine larger communities. Because of their size, national communities take a lot of imagining, and heroes have helped people envision historical unity for a given national population by representing ostensibly shared cultural characteristics and the historical events that are accepted as being critical to that nation's formation and survival. They help simplify conceptions of nations, which is necessary because national communities are far too large and complex to be easily understood and envisioned in themselves.

Do myths tend to veil power structures or, on the contrary, do they unveil them? In whose hands does the power to shape myths and heroes lie?

John Ebert: Myths do not veil power structures, they are power structures. They are absolutely unashamed of power, and they normally sanctify a culture's entire power organization. Darius conquered in the name of Ahura Mazda wherever he went, and Allah has favored one Islamic jihad after the next (including, of course, intra-Islamic jihads). In Vedic India, the priestly caste of the brahmins was the highest and most revered of the four castes, and the aristocracy of the kshatriya could do nothing without their blessings and performance of the proper rituals, such as those of the fire altar, the purohita, pindapitriyajna, and so on. The Yellow Emperor of Chinese mythology is the prototype for all subsequent human emperors.

Now, the power to shape and create myths is a complex process. Myths are normally caretaken by a priesthood of one sort or another, but the actual myths themselves have not been created by the priests, who have merely received them. Who have they received them from? Strange, quirky, idiosyncratic wanderers, visionaries, yogis, shamans and poets. Myths come from the visionary imaginations of these lonely individuals, whose charisma attracts a followership that eventually takes the vision and petrifies it into dogma, ritual and liturgy. With the Buddha, Christ and Mohammad, we have obvious examples of single individuals originating an entire thought system that is taken up by organizers and systematizers who then turn it into a power system for organizing a society. Religion begins with a Christ and then becomes routinized by a Paul.

John Izod: Barthes argued, as we have seen, that myths conceal the true nature of power – and the popular media present an endless stream of examples that confirm his point. However, myths can be turned to unveil power. One device often used in cinema is to reveal that the hero is actually a villain whose sleazy and self-interested actions reveal the corruption of power. Other currents of myths – such as those of the working man and woman – can reveal where power lies. The problem with cycles of this kind, such as the myths surrounding the British at war in the mid-twentieth century, is that they can readily be bought into by state and commercial interests and turned to new ideological purposes.

Myths and heroes may be proposed by anyone (J. K Rowling's Harry Potter novels provide a case in point of a hero initially devised by a lone author). However, Harry Potter only becomes a hero with the assent of Rowling's readers. In general (and the Potter series of books and films illustrate this too), we look to media corporations to promulgate contemporary versions of myths before audiences adopt them.

Occasionally the origination reverses and autochthonous heroes and myths arise, but since journalists are alert to the advantages of a scoop, they seldom escape media attention for long.

Samuel Brunk: As symbols of national unity, heroic ancestors are often employed by officials seeking to enhance state power. State authorities can benefit from the national identity that heroes help produce because a population of people who feel themselves to be part of a single community may be less fractious–and thus more easily governed–than a population that does not. In addition, political leaders often invoke heroes in an effort to bolster their own legitimacy through association with admired predecessors, and in the hope of making citizens more virtuous and productive by giving them models to follow. Ideally, heads of state want to encourage their constituents not to differentiate between state and nation, so that when a Mexican considers the Mexican nation she or he automatically thinks of the Mexican president as its embodiment and spokesperson. In all of this there is much of the veiling of power structures that your question is driving at, a desire to represent the powerful in particular non-threatening or beneficent ways—as fathers, for instance. And to some degree it works.

But myths can also be used to unveil power structures, and in the story I tell about memories of Zapata in my forthcoming book, this happens – because at base myths are social products, made by the many, not the few. The myth of Zapata was adopted by the postrevolutionary state, and helped it gain some legitimacy, but it was created elsewhere, in a particular locality, where it was tied to particular aims. I think this is common—nations, and the people who lead them, often draw their heroes from other, usually smaller communities. After all, as I've suggested above, the first uses of heroes were in families and other communities that predate large national communities. Such roots in smaller communities naturally limit what leaders of modern states can do with them. And so in the case of Zapata, when the state's manipulation of the myth became too hypocritical, and failed to serve the concrete interests of large portions of the population, it was not impossible to use Za pata to unveil power structures. It was possible to return, in a sense, to Zapata's roots. The best known episode of this is, of course, the recent rebellion in the state of Chiapas.

Do you think that myths are the product of specific historical and social contexts, or are they emblematic of universal human concerns?

John Ebert: Well, they are of course both. In fact, stories in general all the world over are both universal and also ethnically specific. Mythologies are primarily designed, however, to be ethnically specific since all the world's civilizations have grown up in relatively isolated geographical pockets in which travel was incredibly slow by our standards. Ideas got around, but they got around slowly.

It is true, however, that myths deal with universals of the human condition, especially the biological patterns that are common to the morphology of the life cycle, such as birth, sex and death. But how these universals are inflected becomes a matter of ethnic specificity. The idea of the soul, for example, is found in all cultures, but when it is examined closely for its connotations, they are invariably quite different. The architecture of the human soul in ancient Egypt, for instance, is complex: the ba, the ka, the renn, the khaibit; these are all different aspects of one's subtle body. In the Christian world, on the other hand, there exists primarily a twofold idea of psyche and spirit. Spirit descends down into an individual from the heavens above and inspires him to speak with the power of the Word of God (like a prophet or a Gnostic) or to perform mighty deeds of physical strength, such as Samson's pushing out of the pillars in the temple of the Philistines. The psyche, on the other hand, is an individual phenomenon. The concept of the Atman in Indian metaphysics is practically unique. No other culture has this idea of the ultimate ground of one's own being as a mere flash of empty consciousness.

These eternal ideas—the gods (or the one God), the soul (or souls)—are found in every culture but with vastly different meanings in each.

John Izod: Why should they not derive from *both* immediate circumstance and universal concerns? Jung and his followers accept that, by means of whatever signifying system, communication is a social act. They recognize that many of today's most powerful narratives must have roots in deep-rooted and widely held concerns of the present. However, as Jungians they also subscribe to the view that if those narratives develop the force of myth they do so because they have a basis in archetypes. So the figurative and significatory cladding of myths adapts to the social and cultural circumstances of the audience; but their archetypal structure alters, if at all, slowly.

Rather than being emblems, myths can rise to being expressions of enduring and widely experienced human needs.

Samuel Brunk: As far as I can tell, myths are fundamental to human societies—everyone has them. And they do address universal concerns in substantial part—death and other moments of passage, etc. But different societies with their different histories produce myths with different emphases. In other words, it is certainly possible to say some general things about myth, but generalizations are risky because the world is a diverse place.

Can we conceive of a world without myths? What place, if any, would scholars have in such a world?

John Ebert: Myth constitutes the very architecture of the human mind. Even when we think we are imagining eminently rational and coldly intellectual scenarios, it is my contention that we are still nonetheless mythologizing. The myths are just hidden inside our concepts. Marxism is a good example of this, for it purports to be a materialist philosophy with no spiritual underpinnings at all. However, its narratives are highly isomorphic to myth: the battle of Light and Darkness is recast in terms of the proletariat against the bourgeois; the holy book is Das Kapital itself; and all of history is imagined as moving toward an apocalyptic day of Judgment, in which the workers will overthrow their bourgeois rulers and take over the means of production. Any student of mythology will recognize these archetypal patterns.

Nietzsche pointed out that whenever, in a given society, there is a preponderance of mandarins, then that means that something has gone wrong in that society. Here, he was thinking not only of the present Western world which we have inhabited since the nineteenth century, but also Hellenistic Greece and Rome, which suffered an analogous breakdown of belief in its myths, accompanied by an attempt to rationalize them away as quaint stories. When myths break down, the society shaped by them also breaks down into chaos and violence. So, whenever we need scholars to explain and interpret myths for us, we can be sure that we are living in an age in which the myths have broken down and retreated into non-obvious spheres of influence.

John Izod: No. The scholar and theorist Roland Barthes asserted in his *Mythologies* that the Marxist society would by definition be free of myth. That was the one myth in his scintillating commentary that he failed to recognize as such. How ideology did seduce him into error!

Samuel Brunk: No, as much as I might sometimes like to conceive of such a world, it's pretty difficult to imagine. That would be a world in which there was only rational thought, a world in which there was no religion, for instance. Myth is fundamental; it's pretty much built into language and social relationships. As far as scholars go, one might imagine that they could turn the light of rational inquiry on myth and destroy it, but of course scholarship isn't always so rational. More likely, given their reliance on language, scholars would find themselves unemployed in a world in which myth had somehow been abolished.

Are power structures myths and how do scholars participate in upholding or deteriorating those structures?

John Ebert: Power structures, as I have said, are indeed myths, for the myths of the day legitimize and sanctify those who are in power. When the myths break down, so do the power structures, which then have to be held together strictly by brute force.

John Izod: As most major states sooner or later demonstrate (though not inevitably on their own people), power springs from the barrel of a gun; and that is no myth, as the dead, injured and displaced of every war-torn nation endlessly bear witness. Nonetheless power structures do depend on myth, as Barthes's work amply demonstrates.

Scholars can support existing power structures by adding to the mythology that sustains them as the work of medieval scholars did for the Church. Conversely they can perform an analysis in the spirit of Barthes to demonstrate how myth conceals power. In this case the scholar (more usually in the guise of the researching, campaigning journalist) may participate in undermining power structures.

Samuel Brunk: This is a difficult question. In my work I discuss both state and nation and keep them analytically separate. The state is obviously a power structure, and many scholars have suggested in recent decades that it is basically a myth, a mirage. I appreciate the thrust of that argument: that people in leadership positions profit from projecting more power than they actually have, that states are not especially centralized and coherent, etc. But to go so far as to say that states are myths is to ignore what is most fundamental about them—they are not *fundamentally* stories we tell about ourselves, it seems to me, but rather, most fundamentally, they are structures that contain very real powers of coercion in their militaries and bureaucracies. So I would say that though states have mythical facets, they are not myths in themselves. Nations, on the other hand, are obviously myths by my definition (they are imagined communities), but they are not inherently power structures. The people who lead states generally try to appropriate the idea of the nation for themselves and thus, I suppose, *make* it a power structure (ultimately, they seek to conflate state and nation), but they are unlikely to be entirely successful because other inhabitants of the nation resist that appropriation.

Please provide us with links and/or primary sources (film, art, poetry, advertisement, fashion, fiction, performing arts?) that evoke heroes, gods, and myths.

- Peruse and Print John Ebert's suggestions »
- Peruse and Print John Izod's suggestions »
- Peruse and Print Samuel Brunk's suggestions »