

IN Pursuit of an American Mythology: Some Definitions  
and Their Application

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INTRODUCTION

Since the days of the dime novel, mass media have been criticized for their supposed deleterious effect on American morality. In 1954, Fredric Wertham touched the usual bases in his critique of comic books bearing the remarkable title, Seduction of the Innocent. Wertham decried the "chronic stimulation, temptation, and seduction by comic books, both their content, and thier alluring advertisements of knives and guns, [which] are contributing factors to many children's maladjustments." <sup>1</sup> These pernicious maladjustments were violence, sadism, and cruelty, and the "Superman philosophy." In the Superman philosophy described by Wertham, supermen were saviors of common folk from "foreign-looking men," and superwomen were always horror types. Wertham accused comic books of using the "most sinister methods of suggesting that races are fundamentally different with regard to moral values." <sup>2</sup> He called for a drastic revision of formulas in which the hero is not a hero unless he acts like a criminal and the criminal goes out like a hero. <sup>3</sup>

In the twenty years since Seduction of the Innocent, the rhetoric of media critics has come to include more sophisticated sociological and psychological terminology. Nonetheless, the elements of content under attack have remained essentially the same: violence, racism, and the heroic machismo that has serious

ramifications for the roles of females as well as males. Regardless of the critical stance we take toward them, we cannot fully understand these stock elements of America's mythic life. This endeavor, in turn, suggests the means by which change occurs. This paper defines certain terms that are necessary for understanding the relationship between culture and communication, a discussion of their application to media content, and their implications for effecting change in the content of mass media products.

### Culture

A basic requirement of this approach is a workable definition of culture. Anthropologist Leslie A. White's definition is useful because it clearly distinguishes cultural events from psychological and physiological ones:

Culture is a class of things and events dependent upon symboling...considered in an extrasomatic content.<sup>4</sup>

The inclusion of all things and events dependent on symboling accounts for the cultural significance of verbal and nonverbal symbols, whether these are being utilized in interpersonal communication as "body language" or in visual media as the "language" of objects arranged in space, for example. The things and events dependent on symboling include:

Ideas, beliefs, attitudes, sentiments, acts, patterns of behavior, customs, codes, institutions, works and forms of art, language, tools, implements, machines, utensils, ornaments, fetiches, charms, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

The second half of White's definition limits the study of these

things and events to the extrasomatic context, or "in terms of their relationship to one another rather than to human organisms." <sup>6</sup> Thus, White distinguishes culturology from disciplines such as psychology, or things and events considered as human behavior and examined in terms of their relationship to the human organism.

Placing things in an extrasomatic context focuses attention on the ways in which the constituents of culture are interrelated. Thus, to borrow again from anthropology, media products may be considered as artifacts (elements of material culture fashioned by human work), or cultural documents. These media artifacts occur in sets as comprehensive as literature, films, or television programs and in sub-sets as exclusive as phonemes (when they are congealed by recording them). The cement that binds each set internally and links the various sets is symbolic communication. The specific function of culture in this context, is to limit communication events and products to symbols and meanings that are comprehensible to the culture group on whatever level that group may be defined.

### Myth, Mythos, Ethos

This overall effect of cultural parameters upon communication messages may be explored in detail by examining certain social structures and how they interact within a culture. Mythos and ethos, framers of ideas and behaviors, are central to this view of culture and cultural products. The general confusion surrounding the use of the term mythos and its

narrative counterpart, myth, requires that a careful explanation of how these terms are being used begin this discussion.

Mythos is the vision of the imaginative and experiential lives of a people articulated in symbols. It acts as a lens through which culture flows and by which culture is informed. Mythos is a fusion of a people's collective imaginative life with the external reality of history. The imaginative life of a people includes the culture's mythology.

The moral structure of a culture is implicit in the narrative structure of myths. Myth is defined by Northrop Frye as "the union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication." Ritual, "a recurrent act of symbolic communication," is identified with dream, the unarticulated "system of cryptic allusions to the dreamer's own life,"<sup>7</sup> in myth. Dream embodies the dialectic of wish-fulfillment (desire) and nightmare (repugnance). It is this dialectic that is acted out in ritual. The verbal expression of the dialectic in narrative form is myth. Thus, myths are stories, whose meaning is embodied in recurrent symbolic figures and events. As such, myths constitute one aspect of mythos.

Some figures and sequences of events appear in the mythologies of many cultures. These figures and sequences we know as archetypes. Because of the existence of archetypes, the myths of any culture bear resemblances to myths found elsewhere in the world. In addition to being universal, however, myths are also culture-specific because they

bear the imprint of the culture in which they occur. The unique qualities of myths are part of a culture's mythos. Thus, it is necessary to account for the significance of figures and events that recur within a culture but which do not necessarily appear in monomyth, to use James Joyce's term. In order to distinguish them from archetypes, these culture-specific motifs may be called stereotypes. The imaginative aspect of mythos is constituted of both monomythic and culture-specific elements.

The societal function of mythos is to provide structure, or coherence, for existence in all of its varieties and complexities. The structuring premises of a culture are beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values. The things that recur in the mythos of a people are the things that are valued and feared by that people. This is the sense in which myth embodies in narrative form the dialectic of desire and repugnance which Frye describes. Mythos also functions as the embodiment of the ambiguities of life and the related contradictions in a culture's interpretation of its existence. It is this function which, according to Claude Levi-Strauss, accounts for the element of recurrence within a culture's mythos. The recurrent patterns are the attempts by various myths, or various versions of a single myth, to overcome the contradictions.<sup>8</sup>

In practical terms, "myth has a perennial function to perform in providing a basis for social faith and action."<sup>9</sup> In order to do so, mythos must reshape the people and events

in terms that are compatible with group convictions. This is not to say, however, that actual experiences have no impact upon the mythos. Mythos is a fusion--to some extent a confusion--of nonrational, mythic, or imaginative experiences, and sensory experience. The two kinds of experience are equally real. In mythos, both kinds of experience are brought together in a coherent vision of the meaning of life. This collective vision makes social cohesion and social continuity possible:

History cannot happen--that is, men cannot engage in purposive group behavior--without images which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence on the infinitely numerous and infinitely varied data of experience. These images are never, of course, exact reproductions of the physical and social environment. They cannot motivate and direct action unless they are drastic simplifications, yet if the impulse toward clarity of form is not controlled by some process of verification, symbols and myths can become dangerous by inciting behavior grossly inappropriate to the given historical situation.<sup>10</sup>

The interaction between the impulse for clarity of form and the verification of the principles of form in external reality gives mythos its dynamic quality.

The ethos of a culture is a projection of the mythos into the realm of action. Ethos is "the sum of the characteristic culture traits by which one group is differentiated and individualized from other groups."<sup>11</sup> Trait most often refers to a pattern of behavior, such as a method of making fire or of transmitting television signals, or the habit of mobility. Different cultures may have traits in common, but no two cultures have

exactly the same configuration of traits, or ethos. In other words, cultures may not necessarily be distinguished from one another on the basis of traits taken individually, but rather on the basis of how traits combine to form the character of each.

The discussion of traits leads to the identification of a cultural function of mythos in addition to those already discussed. As well as giving form to belief and providing a means of interpreting experience for a culture, mythos perpetuates culture traits. As a part of the socialization process, the individual is supplied with the acceptable means of overcoming fears (in the psychoanalytic view) and the concomitant means of fulfilling desires. To the extent that individuals accept the mythos as viable for themselves, they will act in accordance with the ethos. In other words, as the mythos provides for cultural integration and continuity through shared belief, so the ethos provides for cultural integration and continuity through the shared behavior patterns that reflect the mythos.

Another, even more concrete, manifestation of a culture's mythos occurs in the artifacts produced by that culture. Individual artifacts may be viewed as art or as tools, each of these views indicating an aspect of the artifact as it functions in culture. The practical aspect of an artifact is reflected in its use as a tool to effect some result. The artistic aspect is reflected in an artifact's embodiment of "the deep appreciation and powerful expression of values in human life."<sup>12</sup>

By "congealing" the human effort to deal with life, artifacts perpetuate--even eternalize--culture. Artifacts are informed by the mythos at work in the creators of artifacts and their "audience" share a common mythos, the artifacts (whether pots or poems) may be understood and perceived as "useful" by a people. The more the creator relies upon mythos in a work, the more conventional the work, and the more readily it is understood by large numbers of people. But artifacts are not mere media or transmitters of culture. They are an organic part of culture because they contribute to it. Artist and artisans are, in varying degrees, creative. And yet,

Culture and creativity cannot be examined separately for, as [M.J.] Herskovits expresses it, "The creative life does not lie outside the influence of the enculturative experience." On the contrary, "in his experimentation" the artist is "unwittingly" guided by it.<sup>13</sup>

Artists articulate the mythos they absorb in the neculturation process, and their works carry it forward, disseminating and enriching it. The primary means by which mythos is enriched is the introduction of new symbols into it.

#### Symbols and Heroes

The symbol is the vehicle for the articulation and objectification of mythos in artifacts. Recalling White's definition of culture, "things and events dependent on symboling," it may be seen that symbols occupy a central role in culture. By symboling, White means "bestowing meaning upon or an act, or grasping and appreciating meanings thus bestowed." <sup>14</sup> Thus, symbols are the core of the



communication process, the place where the initiation and the reception of messages come together.

In literature, for example, the ultimate "meaning" of a symbol is its reference to some truth of human existence. Any author's vision of such truth is conditioned to some extent by the mythic context in which s/he operates along with the rest of the culture. What is acceptable as "true" on a culture-wide basis is that which is consistent with the mythos. Thus, the aptness of a literary symbol for a culture, or any other symbol used expressively in a cultural context, is in proportion to its ability to signify the mythos for the initiator and the receiver. In other words, the symbols likely to take on the greatest cultural significance are those which embody the belief structure of the culture most effectively. This view is consistent with the psychoanalytic approach to symbols taken by Erich Neumann:

All symbols and archetypes are projections of the formative side of human nature that creates order and assigns meaning. Hence, symbols and symbolic figures are the dominants of every civilization, early or late.<sup>15</sup>

The heroes of a culture perform this symbolic function:

[The hero] is an index to the collective mind and heart. His deeds and qualities are those which millions endorse. He speaks words that multitudes want said; he stands for things that they are often willing to spill their blood for. His legend is the mirror of the folk soul.<sup>16</sup>

The characteristics of the hero tend to conform to the traits identified in the ethos of a culture. As was suggested earlier,

the qualities deemed most important by a culture are those which recur within its mythos. Specifically, then, these qualities are the ones that recur in the heroes of a culture. Some, but not all, characteristics of any culture's heroes are archetypal. For an understanding of heroes as symbols for a cultural group, we must look at all recurrent qualities of the culture's heroes, regardless of whether these qualities are also archetypal.

The hero is a natural focal point for the study of symbols. The hero is at the center of a whole cluster of symbols that derive their significance from their association with him. For example, the gun is a symbol of masculine capability in American frontier legend. The significance of the gun is verified through its association with the hero in his successful defense of ordinary people against hunger, savages, outlaws, and other "varmints." Skill with a gun is associated with manly virtue--with heroes--in frontier myths from Daniel Boone and his long rifle through the cowboy and his six-gun. Often the gun itself takes on the association with manliness, quite apart from the virtue or lack of virtue in the gun-fighter and from the need to kill for survival. The gun becomes symbolic of strength and skill--of manhood--in its own right, even though the vision of the hero never recedes very far into the background of such a symbol.

The symbols of a culture, and especially the heroes--taken with the symbols that surround them in their myths

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and legends--are the product of conscious and unconscious thought processes. As the embodiment of mythos, symbols share the duality of consciousness and unconsciousness, and of imaginative reality and external reality, with mythos. Myths, legends, and tales are constructed of symbols. In folklore, symbols are used descriptively and expressively to embody mythos in language. A myth, or legend, or tale is in this sense a construction of symbols informed by mythos.

Here again, however, it must be stated that mythos does not operate autonomously. The symbols themselves and the process of symboling have a significant impact upon mythos. The influence of language (verbal symbols on thought is documented in the work of Benjamin Whorf and others. Also, once they are established, symbols have a way of seeming to develop of their own accord, in the way that authors describe the takeover of the creative process by characters in a novel. All of the elements of culture discussed here are interrelated and, in various ways, interdependent. All of the interaction occurs through mythos and symbols: mythos because it is a culture's mode of "seeing" life, and symbols because they are a culture's means of expressing and developing that vision. Through mythos and symbols, the collective life of a people grows out of the heritage of its past, is responsive to the exigencies of its present, and is poised in anticipation of its future.

### Application to Media Analysis

The application of the terms discussed above to communication messages amounts to analyzing media products as artifacts which manifest the mythos. The elements of the mythos with which one is concerned in a particular piece of research (such as patterns of violence, sex-role or racial portrayals) may be isolated in a set of media products (such as comic books, mysteries, or western films) by identifying recurrent symbols. From the traits of heroes and other characters as they appear in recurrent patterns, one may infer normative statements about the nature of heroes and villains, men and women, Indians or Italians, for example, as they function in a given dramatic framework. When one finds the same symbols and meanings in different formulas in American media, they are verified as symbols of American culture and not merely as elements of western movies or children's cartoons.

It is the nature of art to fuse the actual and the imagined and to articulate the resultant vision in appropriate symbols. Because artists partake of mythos and contribute to it, their works are valuable sources of cultural information. Artistic constructions bring us closer to the symbols of our most deeply-rooted values than sources that often are considered to be more objective. This point is substantiated by Graham and Gurr, who at the time were co-directors of the Task Force on Historical and Comparative Perspectives on Violence in America for the National

Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence:

Students of national character rightly assume that a close scrutiny of the folklore and creative literature of a culture will isolate certain fundamental themes and images that are far more revealing of its cultural values than are opinion polls or official rhetoric.<sup>18</sup>

The "fundamental themes and images" that are isolable in literature are more likely to reveal the components of the mythos than are opinion polls and official rhetoric because they are more consciously employed by the artist than by the society at large. Furthermore, some of the norms that manifest the mythos turn out to be morally questionable in the light of conscious, objective evaluation. As a result, they are not articulated--often not even recognized--except by dissidents and artists intent upon crystallizing the essence of the American ethos in their work, for whatever artistic or pragmatic purpose.

The usefulness of popular media for the isolation of the mythos is inherent in their formulaic quality. A formula (a conventional system for structuring cultural products) is distinguished from invented structures, which are new ways of organizing works of art.<sup>19</sup> In addition, as John G. Cawelti has pointed out, the formula tends to be culture-specific as opposed to the genre (which embodies a pattern of universal significance). The formula "represents the way in which a particular culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations [stereotypes] in narrative form."<sup>20</sup>

The formulaic work thus performs straightforwardly the function of articulating and reaffirming a culture's mythos. The brevity of popular novels, for example, contributes to the clear, efficient communication of the mythos. Popular works utilize the mythic conventions without the complicating interference of archetypal and idiosyncratic constructions. On the other hand, the tendency of more original authors to communicate their personal visions in the context of cultural and archetypal meanings generally causes them to write longer, more complex works.

Great artists perceive the mythos more profoundly than ordinary people and project it in a fabric of complex relationships among the American mythos, monomyth, and the idiosyncracies of their own imaginations. To the extent that they invent symbols that are compatible with the mythos, they contribute to it. For example, Yoknapatawpha County is Faulkner's invention, but it is so apt a symbol that Americans recognize it as the embodiment of a whole set of premises of American life.

The fact that mythos is manifested in media products of all sorts justifies the use of content analysis as a basis for cultural interpretation of messages. All such research--whether defined narrowly (seeking patterns of occupational portrayals by race or sex, for instance) or more broadly (such as the physical and social "world" of television drama described in the Surgeon General's report on television

and social behavior)--ultimately rests upon this premise. This relationship between the mythos and the media products of a culture allows us to understand media content in the context of the culture as a whole.

This view of communication and culture also provides an avenue for the synthesis of the content studies that currently are proliferating. A somewhat startling example of this occurred in my own research on educational films.<sup>21</sup> One would expect films used in the classroom to be less violent than television cartoons. However,, 53.9% of the educational films coded contained physical violence, whereas 46.8% of the cartoons coded by Gerbner in 1969 contained physical violence.<sup>22</sup> In an earlier study, a colleague and I found that females were portrayed in larger numbers and in a greater variety of roles in comic books than in eudcational films.<sup>23</sup>

Comparing the findings of content analyses executed on different media illuminates the cultural base shared by those media. Contrasting the findings on various media isolates differences that may be attributable to unique social or economic pressures upon producers or unique physical properties of the media. Such comparisons and contrasts prove useful in cross-disciplinary, as well as cross-cultural, efforts to understand media messages. More practically speaking, the analysis of media content

in terms of cultural norms clarifies the means by which writers, producers, and others responsible for media content reinforce traditional patterns of behavior which are of questionable social value.

On this score, a note of caution is in order. It may be suggested that, by demonstrating that violence, racism, or antifeminism is embedded in so potent a force as the American mythos, we unwittingly endorse conservatism in the mass media. Indeed, the television networks insist (with the Nielsen ratings as their evidence) that they are selling what American viewers want most to see. Realistically, those who would advocate change in media content must be aware of what they're asking for. Given the close affinity of our public media and our mythos, a major change in television stereotypes must accompany modification of the mythic framework that supports those stereotypes. Any such change that challenges the limits of acceptability as defined by the mythos is likely to be anything but popular.

This brand of cultural determinism, however, overlooks the dynamic character of the mythos and the potential for creators of media messages to introduce new symbols into America's mythic repository. As in the case of culture-heroes, media heroes may not fly in the face of all that the society sanctifies. The greatest hero is, paradoxically, the perserver of order in the mythos and at the same time the embodiment of its creative aspect.



By way of illustration, we may look at M.A.S.H.'s Hawkeye Pearce, as played on television by Alan Alda. Set in a background of war, the traditional locale of epic heroes, Hawkeye is a pacifist. Even the names Hawkeye and Trapper evoke the tradition of the frontier woodsman, begun in literature with Leatherstocking (or, Hawkeye), and the western mountain man. Also in the best American heroic tradition, Hawkeye is an inveterate guzzler capable of heroics despite the enormous number of martinis he consumes. Despite his education and sophistication, Hawkeye's criticism of the army as an institution is made more palatable by his personal charm and wit. By thus combining conservative and liberal elements, Hawkeye illustrates one process by which mythos is enriched and, ultimately, altered.

It is a slow process, to say the least. M.A.S.H., whose success is due in part to the widespread disapproval of the Vietnam war, is founded on an idea whose time apparently had come. The assault on the social order mounted by Hawkeye and Trapper is far from revolutionary. Values, because of their unconscious, formal quality, are not easily changed. For example, technological and economic progress traditionally has held a high position in the hierarchy of American values. The value placed on progress has been greater than the value placed on natural resources. As a result, resources have been used--and used up--in the belief that life was getting better in direct proportion to the increasing amounts of goods consumed.

With the realization that natural resources can be exhausted, the importance of preserving these resources has increased, and their value has risen. The increasing importance of one value in relation to another necessitates an adjustment in the value structure to accommodate the shift. Such adjustments do not come easily. So we hear the ecology-minded with one ear and the advocates of progress with the other. The length and loudness of the arguments over this issue in times of energy shortage reflect the tenacity of established values and the difficulty with which they are changed. But change they do; and mass media have a role to play in that change.

The capacity for positive, as well as negative, role-modeling effects of television and film is well established. Even though this research is limited by the difficulty of distinguishing mass media effects from those of other socializing agents, certain role-modeling functions of television and film have been documented. These include the fact that media users personalize media content by identifying with certain characters and applying the characters' experience to their own lives. In addition, young media users, in particular, use media as a source of insight into adult roles; and they imitate behavior (both antisocial and prosocial) they see. <sup>24</sup> It also has been shown that the sex, race, and social class of characters and viewers are important influences on differential viewing habits and role-modeling

effects of media. These findings indicate the power of mass media not only to reinforce traditional norms, but also to participate in their revision.

The analysis of media content along the lines proposed here suggests a means by which those in control of media content might separate mythic material necessary for social cohesion from the gratuitous and the dispensable. In this manner, the potential of the mass media as a positive social force might be fully realized without necessarily sacrificing profits on the altar of public good. The success of programs such as M.A.S.H., The Jeffersons, and Good Times indicates that American audiences will accept formulas that feature central characters other than white male pugilists. That any of these characters will enjoy the longevity of, say, Matt Dillon or Steve McGarrett is impossible to predict. Yet, their present success is cause for at least guarded optimism regarding the future of mass media content.

## NOTES

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1

Fredric Wertham, Seduction of the Innocent (New York: Rinehart, 1954), p. 10.

2

Ibid., p. 105.

3

Ibid., p. 116.

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Leslie A. White, "The Concept of Culture," in Culture and the Evolution of Man, ed. M. F. Ashley Montagu (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 46.

5

Ibid., p. 59.

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Ibid., p. 42.

7

Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (New York: Atheneum, 1968), pp. 105-107.

8

Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in Myth: A Symposium, ed. Thomas A. Seboek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 105.

9

David Bidney, "Myth, Symbolism, and Truth," in Myth: A Symposium, pp. 20-21.

10

Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. x-xi.

11

Henry Pratt Fairchild, ed. Dictionary of Sociology (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1972), p. 109.

12

Ibid., p. 16.

13

Dorothy Eggan, "The Personal Use of Myth in Dreams," in Myth: A Symposium, p. 110, quoting M. J. Herskovits, Man and His Works (New York, 1950), p. 403.

14

White, "The Concept of Culture," p. 60.

15

Erich Neumann, The Origins and History of Consciousness, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series, Vol. 42 (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 371.

16

Dixon Wecter, The Hero in America: A chronicle of Hero-Worship (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 488.

17

The blurring of the lines between myth (a narrative about gods or demigods performing deeds at the conceivable limits of desire), legend (an unverifiable story, usually about a real person or place, handed down by tradition and popularly accepted as historical), and tale (a narrative purporting to relate the facts of a real or imaginary event) need not confound the attempt to identify the recurrent figures and events of a culture's mythos. See Stith Thompson, "Myth and Folktales," in Myth: A Symposium, pp. 174-75, for a discussion of the unimportance of differentiating among folklore genre to most kinds of research problems.