

## WRITING THROUGH A MYTHIC LENS

By Jacqueline Feather

Various books have been written analyzing films for their mythic structure. For the screenwriter, an understanding of mythology and its meaning-making patterns is useful to be aware of long before the final draft of the screenplay. Mythic themes if used well, emerge out of the material inherent in a story and can visually and thematically hold a film ‘in place’.

Myths are the stories we tell ourselves that bring structure to our psychological and emotional lives. A myth functions to span human concerns, metaphorically connecting internal landscapes with external realms. As a map of a town shows all possible routes without telling you which to take, mythologies are imaging blueprints that beneath the culture even when they are not examined, for instance the American myth of ‘progress’. Our culture sees progress as a linear unfolding inevitably leading to “better and bigger”. For us, the future holds an almost transcendent power and we move toward it with hope and expectation. Other cultures value ancestral time and the past more than the future, or some notion of ‘progress’.

On an individual level the myths I tell myself about who I am deeply patterns the way I move in the world. Each one of us is inhabited by stories, they come up through the family, ancestors, and through the culture. The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, said “myth and dream come from the same place”. As writers we can intuit it, then describe it metaphorically, through story.

The Greek pantheon of gods and goddesses were personifications of principles. Each divinity represented one principle (both its good and evil) and, as a pantheon, they maintained an overall ecological balance. Aphrodite represented love, but also the *loss* of that love. Hermes was god of communication, yet, too, of liars and thieves (surely we, as communicators, know that it depends on *how* we tell a story that often decides its truth, slant or its obfuscation). Eros, god of connection, shot arrows of gold for attraction, and lead, for repulsion. Thematically, when stories follow an archetypal theme, images connected to that theme hold the story together. For example, a story about mothering might subtly use imagery of milk: spilled, sour, dried, rejected, sweet or overflowing.

Screenplays are a mythopoetic craft, and the good ones have an inherent, underlying logic to them, a *mytho*-logic. Take a look at Jeff Nathanson's *Catch Me if You Can* through a mythological lens and you'll see a mastery of mytho-logic at work. Even if the thread of this logic was done unconsciously, it was done extremely intuitively. The main character, Frank, has an extraordinary capacity to deceive. Hermes, as noted, is god of communication, with all its confusions and ambiguities. Language is full of multiple meanings and nuance. The eternal puer, and the Olympian favorite, Hermes is quick-thinking, clever, creative and ever alive to novelty. He travels with winged feet, swiftly and with stealth, the personification of trickster energy, enchanting, seductive, shape-shifting and inventive. In the film, Frank's character is consistently, thematically, true to this archetypal energy and imagery.

The film opens on the mercurial land of television. The show, "To Tell The Truth", invites us into Hermes' realm, patron to thieves and liars. On the show three young men pose as Frank Abagnale Jr, and it will be up to the audience to make their way through their truth and lies to determine which of the three is the real Frank. The camera holds on

Leonardo Di Caprio, as Frank, and we are lead into the back story. It is now our turn to decide, as the audience at the TV show, who Frank Abagnale Jr really is.

The structure of the film weaves back and forth in time, creating layers of story. It does not follow a linear direction but, rather, allows the viewer to experience the mercurial movement of Hermes in action. Using Christmas Eve as a pivot point, the story moves between 1969 and six years earlier, traveling between the two, until finally they conjoin at the end. Though even the 'end' does not prove a hard boundary, for we are surprised by a "super" that informs us of the ironic details of Frank's ongoing life.

Throughout the story there are references to truth and lies. Who tells, who believes? "Would I lie to you?" Carl asks Frank, who can no longer tell the difference, he is so immersed in the success of his new identities. How perfectly ironic that Frank takes on the identity of a Pan Am pilot, it couldn't be a better metaphor for Hermes, winged creature and swift spirit.

Hermes is known to be a brilliant, magical liar from the time he is born; the child who tells Zeus "I'm going to tell you the truth. I'm a frank person and I don't know how to lie". This, too, is Frank, with his youth, charm and seemingly ingenuousness character. "People only know what you tell them," he tells Carl.

Myths are fluid. They are alive in the *poesis*, in the movement of their telling. Old myths get outgrown and die, at least until they are revived in new form. If a myth means something to the person or culture it stays alive in the re-telling. If the re-telling doesn't work then it doesn't resonate, people don't respond, and the myth simply doesn't live itself forward. One example is the cowboy mythology, which struggles to survive in a new form of re-telling, one that might resonate with the culture. Lucas' "Star Wars"

succeeded in bringing this mythology (and the father-son mythos) to a new realm of the bold re-imagining of the frontier.

What myths do you live now in your own life? What myth is the culture in? What are we dreaming forward? New myths call for new characters, new positions, new terrain. They might draw on different archetypes. How many times do we do the Hero's Journey when there is a plethora of archetypal journeys? Nor must these archetypes have the faces or meanings of the Greek pantheon. Ogun, the African god of metal, roads and war, is a powerful underlying entity in certain African cultures. The Yoruba understood that Ogun, after being immersed in his warrior archetype, must take time outside the village to "wash off the blood", physically and psychologically, before transitioning into domestic life. This is an understanding we could well use today, given those returning from Iraq: the warrior archetype is fierce, fed on the war-cry. Turning this raw energy loose on the hearth and home before shedding its bloodthirst is something the Yoruba perceived as...crazy.

As writers we follow images as they emerge from the darkness, not the darkness of the theater, but the shadowy edges of imagination. This edge is where mythologies come from. They arise in all of us, making stories, and meaning and, in turn, making, and possibly changing, culture.

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