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Body and Time in the New Perfection Myth

ABSTRACT

The text is about the reflections concerning the existence of the threads of old mythologies in the modern culture. They adjust to rapidly changing world. The attention was focused especially on the theme of the hero's perfection, which is very common in creations of modern culture connected with fantasy literature. It is measured by dexterity, especially the speed of bodily reactions. The perfection contains traits found in myth. They are usually connected with 'the fullness of time', which applies both to primal time and eschatology. It is the myth of immortality that connects with this thread. It is found both in modern and ancient times. Nowadays, it is especially animated by the hope given by technological progress. The hermeneutics of presented contents show the continuation of past ideas, appearing mainly in popular culture. In this perspective analysed were such films as *Matrix*, *Avatar*, *Harry Potter*, *Lucy*, *The Giver* and *Star Wars*.

KEY WORDS

fantasy literature, mythology, body, time, perfection

The following considerations are devoted to the occurrence in modern culture of themes relating to old mythology, adapting to a rapidly changing world. One of the motifs present in works of popular culture connected with fantasy literature is that of a hero's perfection, his measured efficiency, particularly in terms of how fast he can react physically. Perfection includes features found in myths, and they primarily concern the "fullness of time", which refers both

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to the primordial time and eschatology. This thread is closely linked in turn to the myth of immortality, found both in ancient and modern eras. Today, this concept has made a come-back with the hope provided by technological advances. The hermeneutics of such content reveals the continuity of past ideas, occurring mainly in popular culture. We shall begin our deliberations by pointing out a few films in which these issues appear. Of course, this is merely a narrow selection from the many works of popular culture which refer to the concept in question, yet it should be sufficiently representative.

An interesting example of the relationship between the perfection of the body and time is the *Matrix* by the Wachowskis.¹ Neo, the main character of the trilogy, lives simultaneously in two spheres, namely the material world on board the Nebuchadnezzar, and in a computer program downloaded into people's minds. Mankind has been defeated by machines and is treated by them as an energy source in the form of human batteries. People live on the vast fields of Earth in the form of enslaved 'quasi – embryos' and in the Matrix, which is the virtual electronic world created by the machines. As a result, people are tricked into believing that they reside in the world of the late twentieth century. The last community of people free from the dominion of the machines is located near the Earth's core in the underground city of Zion, and on combat ships. The struggle against the machines involves penetrating the virtual space controlled by them and releasing human minds, and consequently their bodies too, and then transferring them onto the ships. Liberated from the power of the machines, Neo transfers his consciousness to a digital avatar and uses it to practise martial arts in The Matrix. The techniques are "uploaded" directly to his actual brain while his body rests on the deck of the combat ship. In the world of the Matrix, Neo struggles with the programs controlling humanity in the form of agents. The speed and precision of the blows inflicted testify to the state of his mind. The more perfect his electronic body is, the more this higher operational level contributes to the expansion of his mind's capacity. This principle of feedback between the perfection of the real and the virtual body and the capabilities of his awakening consciousness also applies to other people freed from the Matrix. However, only Neo as The Chosen One is ultimately able to save the world.

In *Avatar* by James Cameron,² the hero portrays an inhabitant of the planet Pandora and in the body of a member of the Na'vi tribe he develops physical

¹ Larry and Andy Wachowskis, *The Matrix*, 1999; *The Matrix Reloaded*, 2003; *The Matrix Revolutions*, 2003; Warner Bros Pictures – Village Roadshow.

² *Avatar*, James Cameron, 20th Century Fox 2001.

abilities evident of his growing perfection. Eventually he gives up his human form, immersing his mind in the original unity of the common field of consciousness of the planet, personalised by the goddess Eywa. In another “cult” opus of popular culture – *Star Wars* by George Lucas – the Jedi win the fight against the dark side of the Force by using lightsabers. During their struggle, this weapon is an organic part of the hero, directly dependant on consciousness, and the effectiveness of the Jedi in battle is proof of the strength of their minds. The transformation of body and soul fuels the lightening reaction times also featuring in Superman and similar comic book heroes. The decisive factor determining victory in each of the described cases is in fact the mind, yet in order to develop and reveal its power it is necessary to transform and perfect the body, whether real or virtual.

The physical action of the characters in these cases becomes all the more precise, perfect and even “magical”. They themselves acquire the skill of mind over matter as well as the ability to manipulate the conscience of other beings. Not only does Neo directly influence the minds of others, but he also subdues the machines, while Luke by using the power of his own will has the ability to transform his material surroundings. In a special way, the relationship between the body and conscience emerges as a philosophical metaphor in Luc Besson’s film *Lucy*.³ Having survived the tragic events following the injection of a certain drug into her body, Lucy’s brain starts to realise – at a galloping pace – her almost limitless possibilities, and her psyche acquires paranormal capabilities. Her body’s actions become the perfect expression of her mind, and Lucy begins to directly affect her surroundings. Lucy finally ends her existence in our world and completely passes into the realm of “pure information” and “pure knowledge”. Her body disappears and even transforms into black matter and energy.⁴ Lucy’s transformation is a gateway to cosmic knowledge, surpassing the limitations of human nature. In all cases, these processes are accompanied by a sense of universal solidarity with life as a whole, transcending individuality, and which in essence turns out to be indestructible. In the aforementioned works we encounter a suggestion of a deep and special relationship between the minds of different creatures with a mysterious kind of Being, which constitutes the basis of the visible world. The various heroes notice and attempt to realise this connection, and their identity extends towards a feeling of unity

³ *Lucy*, Luc Besson, EuropaCorp 2014.

⁴ This brings good reason to believe that it has the form of a cosmic web. This imagination indicates the interesting analogy between the reality envisaged in the form of networks and the expanding network of neurones in Lucy’s brain.

with the whole universe. This is reflected, for example, in their use of the Force, the energy field of Eywa, or in the cosmic web of black energy.

These works of popular culture manifest a special relationship between the different aspects of existence: where there is a question of action in the virtual world, real body and its nervous system rests in apparent slumber, yet still forms the basis of existence for the mind and conscience. However, the new corporeality becomes the entity with which the hero identifies himself. The most important determinant and confirmation of this process is the body, perfect in action and fully participating in the transformation and “life” of the universe. This then seems more like a sign of transcendence than an ordinary product of evolution. These considerations relate to several issues. The first concerns the origins of such an image of reality presented in the cited works, while the second is the concept of man proposed therein. The third problem concerns the relationship of the body and time. It may appear that attempts to answer these three questions direct reflection on popular culture towards the realm of mythological thinking.⁵

Regarding the first of these issues, the model of the world most probably etched in many works of popular culture, as soulful and internally related, comes from two sources. The ideas of the East, present at least since the 1950s in Western thought, have been joined in the last thirty years by motifs of the discovered and newly interpreted world-views of ancient and traditional communities. Together, these visions have formed a syncretic picture of the living and the conscious universe. This can be found, for example, in the New Age movement. The main myth governing this content is the heroic myth, as described by Joseph Campbell.⁶ The ecstatic wanderings of the key figures in the real and spiritual world carry the features of a heroic quest. The mythical hero takes on the challenge and just like in traditional myths, the aim is to restore the balance disturbed by some dangerous event. To achieve this he must cross the border between worlds. His journey takes place simultaneously in the external cosmos and the depths of the psyche. The ensuing spiritual development entails a high price. In the first three films mentioned in particular, this motif was heavily emphasised.

Today's reformulation of the traditional hero myth lies in the fact that his expedition takes place not in the depths of the psyche, but mainly in the virtual world. It combines elements of everyday reality and mental projections.

⁵ Myths in popular culture have a new character, although rooted in traditional thinking. Cf. Ł. Trzeciński, *Mit wolności w cyberkulturze*, Kraków 2013.

⁶ J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton 1968.

The image thus created resembles the reality described in Indian philosophical doctrines that would eventually reach the West and influence perceptions. This primarily regards Vedānta, Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, introduced primarily thanks to the New Age movement and its cognate currents, inspired by Eastern thought.⁷ The existence of the phenomena forming the world is in this sense dependent on the psycho-activity of a particular entity. Inspired by Buddhist terminology, we could say that the reality perceived by a person is a “field of experience” created by himself, called the “World”. In the doctrines mentioned here, everything that exists, both in the objective and subjective dimension, has to do with the essence of human subjectivity (conscience, soul, atman), which is all that we can call real in any absolute sense. Its existence is located beyond the subject-object divide, and the profound experience of this fact is referred to as enlightenment. In a sense, in these doctrines the outside world is rather like a dream.⁸ The task of man is to dream consciously, firstly in order to be able to make free choices and act in accordance with them, and then to awaken completely from this world of dreams.⁹ These ideas, generally reformulated and superficial, however were adapted in modern works of popular culture, appearing particularly in situations where the hero encounters some kind of “master” who then reveals to him the secrets of the meaning of existence.

Despite the claim in works of popular culture that the only “real” reality is the mind and soul, the material body still remains a central element of these new modes of existence. Without it, it is not possible to transcend the various conditions of existence, nor is it feasible to leave the virtual world. It should be emphasised that in contrast to the European tradition, the East did not disdain the body and or its functions, particularly its sexuality.¹⁰ It would seem that these very inspirations, speaking about the body as a tool of the mind, were a primary contributor to a turning point in the popular consciousness of the West, which thus far had depreciated the physiological

⁷ The New Ages’ reception East was preceded by extremely influential theosophical concepts present for over a hundred years in Europe and the United States, mainly thanks to the work of Helen Blavatsky, Henry Olcott and Annie Besant.

⁸ Dreams as a phenomenon to justify the relative reality of the world have been used by many Western and Eastern thinkers.

⁹ In particular, the theme of the hero awakening and realising that his life so far had been an illusion similar to sleep is a common motif in fantasy literature, with a nascent connection with Buddhism.

¹⁰ Although European anthropology thanks to Thomas Aquinas adopted Aristotle’s theory of human psychophysical unity, this trend stemming from Plato, according to which the body is a prison of the soul, gained greater public recognition.

dimension of existence. After World War II this was further embellished by the widespread “ideology” – thanks to pop culture – of a psychophysical human perfection. This was derived from the syncretic philosophical and religious currents associated with the Eastern martial arts, and yoga which had become extremely popular in the second half of the twentieth century. The concept of man achieving spiritual perfection and fulfilment connected the spiritual states of man with his physical activity. In turn, with technological progress having revealed virtual worlds, quasi-physical activity has found its place in the network,¹¹ primarily in the forms avatars. The status of these cybernetic creatures is ambiguous, although, as psychological studies show, it is possible to identify significantly with this form of manifestation.¹² They are also the product of machines as well as of the mind of the user. So far without its physiological form, people cannot live and it remains unknown whether or not the dream of the extropists has been fulfilled – to move human consciousness entirely to the form of an avatar, or to the digital network itself, which would in turn become its cybernetic “body.”¹³ In works of popular culture, however, this dream becomes reality, providing hope that in the future we may achieve a state of independence from our physiology. It is not unreasonable to infer that technological progress may make this happen sooner than people think.

The second question concerns new anthropology, and is related to the mind-body problem confronted with the possibility of identifying with various body types. Creating an image of the world that allows this type of identity depends mostly on the imagination, which can break down almost all restrictions, including time and space. Today, the role of the imagination takes over the virtual world, but there arises a difference between these categories. The character of an avatar has a “more powerful” manner of existence than merely being an imagined character since an avatar is connected with some kind of material basis not only independent of the mind but also of the electronic reality. In fact, the avatar exists in a digital dimension, and therefore to a certain extent can fulfil the role of a real, physical body.¹⁴ Many authors even believe

¹¹ A specific expression of this is the phenomenon of e-sports.

¹² The ability to identify with created characters is especially visible in RPG.

¹³ Extropism sprung from the works of Max More and became an early form of trans-humanism, one of whose main representatives today is Raymond Kurzweil (*The Singularity is Near*, New York 2005).

¹⁴ According to the Eastern perspective, all these kinds of bodies are ultimately imagination and are either durable or fleeting emanations of the mind. In our culture this view resembles the concept of Plotinus, who claimed that matter is the last of the emanations generated by the human soul.

that the ontological perspective, which in today's popular culture today propagates the concept that matter originates from the realm of consciousness, the mental body is no different in its essence from the physical body. There is nothing to prevent a similar status being bestowed upon the digital body of an avatar. Today, the problem merely revolves around having to give up the primary and limiting natural human physiology and transfer the mind to a perfect machine. In a sense, this would be a rebirth in a new world in which man could fulfil his creative function free from any physiological constraints. As far as it is possible to identify with a body generated in this way, his relations with the new reality could replace the old bodily relationships and create a different kind of identity. In this perspective, the mind-body problem is a real challenge for new anthropology, because not only does the mind entering a virtual world require a new definition, but also a concept of a psycho-physical organism that has been significantly widened compared to traditional approaches. These new phenomena occur mainly through the process of cyborgization.¹⁵

The third of the questions to be addressed concerns the relationship of the body and time. It is obvious that physiology limits the body's reaction time to stimuli. Generally speaking, there are two generally observed ways to overcome this obstacle, the first of which involves the cyborgization of humans.¹⁶ The second, which has also been mentioned, is the transfer of the body's actions to a virtual world. In works of popular culture, the idea often occurs that the speed of physical reactions not only indicates a mastery over the body, but also provides a hope of controlling time. The desire for liberation from the power of transience is today one of the main themes of human activity, whether scientific, religious or mythological. In popular culture, both these options are acceptable. In the end, it is a question of either the hero radically transforming his own body or acting through an avatar. There is also a combination of these two dimensions of existence, and in all cases supernatural reaction times can be achieved.

In every era, the search for excellence was associated with transcending time.¹⁷ This was accompanied by the belief that exceeding its natural limits is a prerequisite for attaining what actually exists. In the cited works of popular

¹⁵ Por. Ł. Trzeciński, op. cit.

¹⁶ An example of cyborgization can be found in the DARPA program "Perfect soldier". Cf. J. Garreau, *Radical Evolution. The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Mind, Our Body – and What It Means to Be Human*, New York 2005.

¹⁷ According to one of the greatest Zen masters – Dogen – time is synonymous with existence. Cf. Dogen, *The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo*, trans. N. Waddell, M. Abe, New York 2002.

culture, time takes the form well-known from many mythological characters as “the beginning of time.”¹⁸ In this perspective, it is indistinguishable from what is considered to be truly real. Luc Besson through the mouth of Lucy says explicitly that the only real measure of the world is the unit of time, and the heroine demonstrates the nature of this phenomenon by linking it with movement, in other words – with change. The image created by her of a car moving faster and faster eventually disappears and its perception becomes impossible, because it ceases to exist for the perceiver. You could reverse the Lucy experiment – so that something might exist in a prescribed form and should move at a rate not exceeding cosmic speeds. Setting aside the position of science on this issue, in common perception the measurable “flow” of time is necessary for the adoption of any form. Metaphorically speaking, time gives form to existence. Therefore, similarly to the described vision the most important value turns out to be the very flow of information in whatever form that may be, and the process of knowledge acquisition connected with it. In Luc Besson’s film, this is supposed to lead to the attainment of a universal state of mind, which in essence transcends time and form. The expanding conscience of Lucy questions her own identity whose discovery could be only accomplished through the mythical entry into primordial time, by returning to the beginning, because only this holds the answer to questions about the meaning and purpose of the events which come to pass. In her vision, Lucy goes back through successive eras of the universe up to the formation of the galaxies and the first cosmic pulse which would separate the primary element of life into two forms. Having attained this level of knowledge, the heroine returns to the original state of unity and completeness upon which her physical body disappears yet is also “everywhere” from there on. The state of perfection is at the same time a paradoxical state “beyond time” in which past, present and future bind together in a manner incomprehensible to the rational mind.

The time referred to in the cited works conforms to the “eternal now” of mysticism, but in works of popular culture it can be described generally in terms of mythological categories.¹⁹ Myths talk about this specific kind of time without referring to the metaphysical or mystical experience, but they do so through their specific construction. As cultural anthropology reveals, the dimensional multiplicity of a mythical story, the split between the characters

¹⁸ The link between reality and primordial time is best described in the works of Mircea Eliade. Cf. M. Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return. Cosmos and History*, Princeton 1971.

¹⁹ The concept of the “eternal now” is not purely the domain of philosophy or theology but is also close to the reflections of cultural anthropology.

appearing therein, the return to events of unknown identity, chronological confusion – these are all the means by which the myths achieve their goal.²⁰ The mythical story intends to show that everything actually happens at the same time, because in this way of thinking, in fact, it is not possible to go beyond primordial time.²¹ Its elaboration in the flow of events shaping our world is merely illustrative of existential fullness, namely the existence of everything has always been from the beginning, is now and always will be. Mythological thought aims to convince the audience that the world has already been given its final reality in full, in an eternal relationship. In this perspective, nothing happens that did not already exist in an embryonic form. Reality and the “eternal now” are synonymous. Therefore, Neo must return to the Source, Lucy to the first act of creation and the hero of Avatar to the mythological beginning represented by the goddess Eywa. Luke, on the other hand, during his quest returns to the “space” of his own psyche representing the beginning, in which the temptation to cross over to the dark side of the Force fights with the light side.

There is a special kind of dialectical tension between the proto-beginning and the time of intervening events. We see this clearly in works imbued with the mythical motifs of popular culture. If a movie wanted to present only the “eternal now” then no narrative would be possible if it merely imitated a classic mythical story in its traditional form – this would be frightfully boring for the audience. Myth motifs are therefore usually hidden in the deeper structure of the work, “radiating” from the depths of meaning and moving the hidden layers of the psyche. The problem is, however, in certain works explicitly the essence as well as the centre of the narrative. For example, in *The Giver* by Phillip Noyce,²² belonging to the category of post-apocalyptic dystopia – the “ideal” society only experiences the present tense. However, the real existence in the empirical world requires three times, real change in the rhythm of events, because without it there is no life at all. In turn, living requires memory, so there has to be someone whose job it is to remember. In the society outlined in *The Giver* there is a man who remembers everything in order to give people advice when faced with unusual dangerous situations. For this society it is necessary to live in isolation from other people, because it is not possible to maintain a rigidly “ideal” social structure whose members

²⁰ Cf. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris 1973.

²¹ There exists in this case a structural similarity between this approach and the Indian world-view of Satkaryavada, proclaiming that the effect is merely an extension of the cause.

²² *The Giver*, Phillip Noyce, Walden Media 2014.

remember the past or think about the unpredictable future. The concept of history here is deliberately denied and when it is finally revealed, the “ideal world” breaks up under the pressure of life into three times.²³

Transcending time via the transformation of the body has another dimension. Breaking its barriers is at the same time a “taming” of space. Then it is not a fundamental obstacle to man, as opposed to an ordinary life in which resistance presented by things testifies to the enslaved human condition. The hero’s “body”, breaking the constraints of time and space and achieving perfection in this regard, may be found paradoxically everywhere and at any time. Note that such an image refers back to the previously mentioned mythological in full.

One might finally ask how the perfection attained in these films finds expression. The answer lies in the issue of freedom. The theme of liberation, even before it has been won, runs vividly through these works. The will of the heroes appears to run on auto pilot, which is not to say that they merely do whatever they fancy nor act solely according to their whims. It may be more relevant to refer to the situation, which Joseph Campbell called the “cosmization” of mythical actions. This involves a harmonious interaction with the universe, when the individual will naturally connects with its universal character, expressed in the adoption of responsibility for others and aimed at a target unobscured by various illusions. When Agent Smith asks Neo why he continues to struggle in the face of the seeming inevitable, he replies, “because I like it.” Making a decision even in the face of the inevitable is, in the mythical perspective, already sufficient justification for human existence and action. In *Avatar* Jake Sully’s sheer strength of will, as a consequence of free choice, overcomes Miles Quartrich. Luke Skywalker’s decision to give up the struggle with his father as hopeless led to, among others, the death of

²³ It may be added that due to the principles regarding presentation, some innovations are not applied because of the difficulty in showing any action. Being in the “eternal now” in this situation would look poor. For example, work is currently being carried out to improve the crosshairs in pilots’ helmets. Studies are also being conducted on the transfer of information directly from the brain to machine. The combination of these techniques results in the fact that the projectile, possibly a laser beam, is guided by thought alone, but in the film the decision not to show a classic struggle impoverishes the whole vision. This is similar to the situation at Japanese railway stations of the twentieth century. The complete automation had a negative psychological effect on the cashiers since they no longer had to perform any physical movement. Therefore, they were equipped with abacuses to help them work out how much change to give.

the Emperor. Harry Potter fights because that is what he “wants.”²⁴ Thanks to the free decisions flowing from the power of the mind steeped in mythology and the primordial dimension of existence, the heroes are able to fulfil their mission to restore harmony to the world.

It may be noted that the structure of the motifs underlying the narratives of many works of popular culture has certain parallels in the structure of the world described in some philosophical doctrines. Basically, however, they are associated with myths. A feature of the mythology is durability, which is not to say that they do not change their forms. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, every reimagining of a myth is a testament to its life, and the modern era shows that in the realm of popular culture the above claim holds water. This article presents only one aspect of this topic. I intended to show that the ancient mythological motifs of perfection, the original fullness and “eternal now” have taken on an amended, contemporary mythological form which – as it turns out – is alive and well today and continues to be relevant to human needs. Perhaps it is just as Bruno Schulz once wrote, “Our most sober concepts and definitions are distant offshoots of myths and ancient stories. There is not even one of our ideas that is not derived from mythology, a mythology that has been transformed, mutilated, remoulded [...] The mythologization of the world has not yet ended.”²⁵ The question remains whether the new myths will manage to neutralise the fears awaiting the man in the new digital reality.

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²⁴ Cf. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Bloomsbury, London 2005, p. 478–479.

²⁵ B. Schulz, *Mityzacja rzeczywistości*, [w:] idem, *Proza*, Kraków 1972, s. 335.

