

KATARZYNA BAJKA*
(Jagiellonian University)

Modern Narratives as Myth – Some Remarks on Walter J. Ong’s Secondary Orality Thesis

ABSTRACT

This paper provides some theoretical remarks on investigating modern popcultural narratives, and especially focuses on the ability to analyze it as myth. Author uses Walter J. Ong’s theory of secondary orality as well as methodology established by Victor Turner in order to distinguish and compare specific features of oral communication to the serialized mass media communication and storytelling of modern day. Similarities allow to cautiously use the term “myth” in reference to popcultural contents, while complex approach helps to go beyond the mere analysis of a given text, towards exploring communication and dynamic changes of the relation between the storyteller and the audience.

KEY WORDS

myth studies, anthropology, modern narratives, secondary orality, popular culture

Nowadays, many researchers of popular culture focus their methodological efforts on the topic of the modern myth, and therefore pose various relevant questions. Can we really speak of contemporary narratives in terms of myth, and if so, what is the “underlying structure” of such a myth as compared to the ancient, pre-Christian, oral mythologies? Do we compare the two? How do we re-define myth itself, and how do we analyse narratives created and disseminated in the modern media? In order to address at least some of these topics, in the following article I suggest examining the modern media through

* Institute of Philosophy
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland
e-mail: kasia.bajka@uj.edu.pl

the lens of Walter Ong's secondary orality thesis, which is one of his lesser known and unsubstantially developed ideas. I perceive this idea as a means towards an interesting debate, and a methodology prototype which may adapt to new contexts. My proposal is a new approach that combines the literary or audiovisual content with the audience's response, bringing modern narratives closer to the realm of old-fashioned, oral myth. This allows us to broaden the research on myth by successfully adding a sense of *communitas*, common ground and a feedback loop that structural or psychoanalytical approaches to myth fail to acknowledge.

The following essay is a preliminary draft of a methodological path, a theoretical sketch that will hopefully set some background for further studies and might eventually lead to fieldwork conducted in Poland.

Myth¹ is a fundamental component of human thought. One only has to consider the magical feelings attaching to authority, or the glamour attributed to celebrities or the power of divided historical origins and cultural traditions to form modern communities and to agree the need for myth in the modern era.

Any life story, written or oral, is in one sense a personal mythology, a self-justification. This is true for people of all ages. And all of these stories embody and illustrate ideals of character, the desire for independence, freedom, or filial loyalty for those who prioritise family tradition. It is through oral narratives in particular that we come closer to traditional, popular mythology in the conveying of moral values through the recounting of events. Such stories very often serve as parables, exemplifying courage, kindness or strength and, like classic fables and myths, they can bear remarkable resemblances to one another. Below the surface of our everyday narratives, it is difficult yet possible to find the residues of a magical world view, notions of destiny, the hand of fate in events, the notion of signs. Often for instance a story will focus on a moment of revelation or truth and an importance attached to extraordinary coincidence, ideas of destiny and fate, a hidden hand guiding the subject forward. Many stories abound in the narratives of those who were brought up poor, sometimes perhaps as a way to distinguish theft, making it a topic of a cautionary tale. Motifs of mysterious strangers that appear to lend a helping

¹ By myth I will understand: "controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles, which have remained constant throughout the course of human history as the form and nervous structure of the human physique itself. Briefly formulated, the universal doctrine teaches that all the visible structures of the world – all things and beings – are the effects of a ubiquitous power out of which they rise, which supports and fills them during the period of their manifestation, and back into which they must ultimately dissolve" (R. Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, London 1992, p. 257).

hand are common throughout history, as are narratives on miraculous rescues or inanimate objects which take a life of their own. This is the common lore.

But the most powerful myths are those which influence what people think and do, which are internalised, and externalised, be it performed, acted on or distributed, and which these people pass on consciously or subconsciously to their children and kin, to their neighbors, workmates, and colleagues as part of the personal stories which are the currency of such relationships. This vital, organic connection between myth in personal narrative and in public tradition is deeply connected to both primary and secondary orality, and binds the two. It is often reflected in popular culture.

But how do we analyse such content? One way to investigate pop-cultural narratives, both literary and audiovisual is by focusing on an underlying structure or convention, which allows us to compare various stories, to extract popular motifs, concentrate on the most common symbols and patterns, take a look at the evolution of every storyline and finally to summarise the appeal of such a story among the members of a particular society by grasping its basic meaning and plot. The works of Vladimir Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss and especially those of Joseph Campbell² come in handy.

John G. Cawelti, an academic interested in current, formulaic narratives, claims that all works of modern culture possess their own patterns, formulas and aesthetics, that reside half-way between the literary and oral structure, but lead to something much more than the classical original versus formulaic dichotomy. He states, that:

The most important generalizing concept applied to cultural studies in recent years is that of myth. [...] All cultural products contain a mixture of two kinds of elements, conventions and inventions. Conventions are elements that are known to both the creator and his audience beforehand – they consist of things like favorite plots, stereotyped characters, accepted ideas, commonly known metaphors and other linguistic devices. Inventions, on the other hand are elements that are uniquely imagined by creator, such as new kind of character, ideas, and linguistic forms.³

Though serial works often have marginal artistic pretensions, they have an enormous power when it comes to indulging the viewers' needs and creating a common ground for society members, a symbolic sphere they can easily relate to. A sense of *communitas*, a shared ritual, and a common ritual scene – seems to be another strong link between what defined myth in the old days,

² A. Szyjewski, *Etnologia religii*, Kraków 2001, pp. 88–89.

³ C. J. Cawelti, *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture*, Wisconsin 2004, pp. 6–7.

and what defines it now. It is important to state that this communal sense is lacking from the structural and psychoanalytical approaches to investigating myth. It can only be suspected due to the many variations on each theme and the longevity of myths and their presence in popular culture.

Yet the aforementioned classical approaches rely solely on the text itself – on the written versions of what was once oral material. In the real world, versions and derivations are innumerate. This perspective allows the researcher to add one more profound dimension to the understanding of a given phenomena or, in the words of Victor Turner, a powerful symbol as a method of communication, and that dimension is feedback.⁴ Turner's proposal of fieldwork methodology seems suitable here. His idea is to gather and combine three overlapping layers of research material – firstly, researchers' observations (in this instance, influential audiovisual material/text, both in terms of its content and range), secondly, people's own interpretation and explanation of what they see and how they react to it (in this case, interviews and the vast array of internet commentary, i.e. discussions, blogs, fan-fiction, other online activities – the secondary orality hypothesis might be helpful here), and finally, to cross the two with some general theories (be it Propp, Campbell, Levi-Strauss, Goody⁵ or Ong). One outcome is a more accurate analysis of a given topic, and to capture how modern narratives evolve, transform, affect and inspire the imagination of their creators and recipients would be a great addition to the formerly widespread static methodology.

It is relatively easy to analyse any pop-cultural content with structural and psychoanalytical tools designed to extract the underlying myth. Culture versus nature, self and other, right and wrong, freedom and responsibility, *rites de passage* – it is all most certainly there. Such kinds of observations with regard to popular culture have become quite tedious, and the role of future criticism should be to provide something more than structural mythology to analysis of myth. These approaches fall under the heading of *maieutics* (a word derived from the Greek *maicutikos*, “midwifery”), as they are designed to make us recognise something previously latent in our mind rather than tell us something we did not know before. Therefore, I find this kind of explanation useful, yet not complete. It gives us one side of the story. The notion of mythical structure is not enough to make a myth out of any given content. The important and missing element here is the effect it provides, the myth's ability to affect,

⁴ V. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Antistructure*, Chicago 1969, pp. 131–132; idem, *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, New York 1967.

⁵ J. Goody, *Mit, rytual i oralność*, tłum. O. Kaczmarek, Warszawa 2012, pp. 74–95.

change and transform human lives, to explain what cannot be explained by science, law and official religion.

When investigating modern culture, range and reaction are one of the more important features that distinguish influential content from the more artistic and niche ideas or stories, and the communal sense of popular culture provides the audience with the notion of a certain canon. Popular genres are immediately recognisable by their key features like a specific type of protagonist, a particular kind of plot pattern or setting and a distinctive iconography. Popularity and aesthetic principles such as conventionality, popular mythology and serial form aspect suggests lines along which the canon of the best of what has been thought and said can be varied and expanded. But the process of evolving and changing the canon is essentially a collective one and a central part of the ongoing practice of outside criticism.

Popular culture in general is an ideal environment to investigate our own societies' anthropology – with cultures composed of a multiplicity of differing religious groups, the synthesis of values and their reaffirmation that has become an increasingly important function of the mass media and popular arts. One important dimension of the formula is the aforementioned social or cultural ritual – which could be hopefully observed while engaging in the project's proposed fieldwork. Its theory, group solidarity and group activities feed on pop-cultural content and are encouraged by it. Mass entertainment has a ritual structure added to it, and it reassures the community in its goals, soothes the minds of its consumers and recreates society as a successful, straight-forward, developing one.

Many authors would oppose and contrast culture with pop-culture, as Plato did with cooking and medicine or make-up and exercises – popular culture being an *ad hoc*, temporary fix. This brings us directly to the idea of *bricolage*⁶ as a way of providing answers to urgent matters by using what is already at hand, famously characteristic for oral cultures often taking the form of a myth, arranged from bits and pieces of previously existing stories. As the name itself suggests, mass culture is popular and common, while highly artistic content may not attract nor influence wide audiences. The impact of popular culture on Western societies is much more stable, fluent and predictable, as society reflects itself in mass culture as a whole rather than in terms of its outstanding individuals. Therefore popular culture seems to be a perfect environment for mythical content. It bears multiple functional similarities to the oral mechanics of developing and distributing content, and relies on an instant, on-line,

⁶ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Mysł nieoswojona*, tłum. A. Zajączkowski, Warszawa 1962.

momentary commentary and feeds on common, emotional participation in the stories that are propagated.

Popular culture as such relies mostly on the so-called popular genres. The definition of popular genres, formulaic narrative types or of literature have facilitated more complex critical, historical and evaluative approaches to the vast output of the modern mass media. The idea of popular genres itself developed from the assumption that established categories of popular culture such as westerns, detective stories, romances, gothic horrors, situation comedies etc., were comparable in some ways to traditional artistic genres like tragedy, comedy, the social novel, pastoral and satire. Today we can discuss the likes of superhero movies, police procedurals, teen dramas or television sitcoms in the same manner. Popular genres can be analysed in terms of their individual history and structure. However there is also a sense in which the major popular genres taken together constitute a cultural system, comparable in some ways to generic systems, and we can also try to study the evolution of that system.

Mythical worldview is specifically present and easy to detect in modern fantastic narratives, be it science fiction, fantasy, cyberpunk or the superhero genre. Todorov⁷ argues that the fantastic as we know it now first appeared during a period in the evolution of Western culture when traditional religious faith in transcendent supernatural reality had been eroded by the rise of science and naturalism but not entirely destroyed. The literature of mystery reflects the conflict between explanation and inexplicability, between reason and the incomprehensible. The inherently serial character of these stories indicates that the detective may solve one crime, but he can never overcome crime itself and therefore must face a new crime in the next story. The same goes for superheroes. Count Dracula always rises from the grave and Frankenstein's creature is continually reanimated.

Therefore another important concept of popular aesthetics that could take us through literary content back to oral structures is the centrality of the serial in the modern media. The programming imperatives of mass communication and mass publishing transform the serial, either as a continuing narrative or as set of variations on a single basic pattern, into a dominant type of creation and production.

The structural approach explains the underlying schemes but says nothing about the outcome, the reaction a proper myth should evoke among its audience who should somehow participate in myth, in order to be influenced

⁷ T. Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Cornell 1975; idem, *Teorie symbolu*, tłum. T. Stróżyński, Gdańsk 2012.

and transformed by it. We cannot know whether the formula makes a myth. This finally brings us to Walter J. Ong's theory. Some angles of research on the specifics of modern communication and media, including the likes of Marshall McLuhan⁸ and Walter J. Ong, may shed light on such an approach. It could be useful to apply the "secondary orality" theory of Walter J. Ong (which is more of a prognosis, mentioned briefly in two of his works from the 1980s, but never fully developed) to myth studies, orality serving as a system of communication strongly, almost symbiotically and undeniably connected to classic myth.

Walter J. Ong followed Marshall McLuhan's path and stated that electronic communication has transformed and will continue to transform the relations between talk and text, and thus our understanding of the whole spectrum from the oral to the typographic to the televisual. Like many others, he speculated on the long waves of causality stretching from cave paintings to comic books. Ong never lost his own distinctive voice and concerns: the analysis of the steady, progressive interiorization of consciousness, the problematic status of religious symbols and the sacred in a secularising world of non-sacred media, the deeply agonistic, oppositional yet often ritualised conflicts that are the everyday topic of social life.

To Ong, in the primary oral culture of the past – a culture that knew no literate modes of communication – thought and expression had a series of identifiable features.

To take his thought further I would argue that most of the following features of primary orality are visible in the modern serial narratives/formulas of popular culture and are being actively embraced by the communities involved.

Therefore, orality is:⁹

- Additive rather than subordinative, with details or items piled one upon the other (serial narratives would mostly add and explore familiar content, convention being a mandatory element, and invention being secondary).
- Aggregative rather than analytic, with ideas clustered on clichés and maxims that aid memory (pop-culture is also based on vivid stereotypes, and formulas reside at the very heart of narratives).
- Redundant or copious, with much repetition (the seriality of modern media itself proves this, as well as pop – culture's tendency to revive, recreate,

⁸ M. McLuhan, *Wybór tekstów*, tłum. E. Różalska, J. M. Stokłosa, Poznań 2001.

⁹ E. Ed., B. E. Gronbeck, T. J. Farrell, P. A. Soukup, *Media, Consciousness and Culture. Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, London 1991, p. 15.

reboot, remake popular content, engage in spin-offs, sequels and prequels to every story).

- Conservative or traditionalist with a culture's primary commitments frozen in narratives since there is no other way of maintaining cultural history (also modern narratives are hardly ever controversial or experimental, as their goal is to attract and please wide audiences and to be in the broadest sense of the word – “commercial”. Lets recall that popular narratives, whether movies, comic books or tv shows engage their audience in a very substantial way – by requesting money for hearing, watching, reliving the story and recreating it in their everyday life. Merchandise, and the wide, varied distribution of the stories generate income for the creators of popular narratives. We buy DVDs, t-shirts, board-games, video-games, soundtracks, figurines, costumes, we attend conventions and festivals. We pay to hear the bard sing).
- Concrete in its processing of the live-word, because the only way to test knowledge is referentially (as opposed to the classical literary works, where crisis is often internal and the outcome of heroes' struggles – inconclusive. Therefore works of popular culture tend to rely more on action, on special effects and on visual, impressive, outside movement rather than on struggles that are complex or internal. Popular narratives tend to provide a clear “win” or “lose”, a happy or an unhappy ending to a movie or a tv series – at least for the time being, as the seriality paradigm requires the constant recreation of any given scenario).
- Agonistically toned, with the testing process executed combatively (pop-cultural content is largely based on the characters' actions and on violence, which makes a stronger impact on an audience, and therefore its memotechnic value is stronger. The storylines tend to be over-simplified and similar to each other. The tropes are widely recognisable and the focus is on a distinctive goal, pursued by means of physical force and by rapid movement).
- Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced, with personalised expressions, and no objectifications of the world (in the case of popular culture, we are dealing with a product that is in some sense collective, not with the work of an individual artist – the creator, like in primary orality, is anonymous, blurred, as the content spontaneously “recreates itself” in contact with community and the vision of the world is also very current and emotional. Additionally, social media activities help to further

blur the line between the audience and the creators, and enhance the empathetic attitude towards a given narrative).

- Homeostatic, with cultures living in a permanent present, retaining what is useful (there is no further goal of pop-culture other than to deliver instant entertainment and explain the current reality and its perks. In that sense, popular culture is an *ad-hoc* generated *bricolage* fix of familiar elements and tropes. In addition, the nature of communication in the modern media gravitates towards an open, instant, back and forth dialogue that happens in real-time, and the language used in such communication often relies on a manner of speech, while even the written word is a conversation rather than literature).
- Situational rather than abstract, because memory is largely concrete (again, as opposed to literary formula, pop-cultural – secondarily oral – narratives are based on action rather than on internal monologues, which makes them easier to remember and to repeat).

It would be of interest here to remark on the theme of violence – associated with orality, memory, vivid images and actions that distinguish oral structures from the literary. In popular culture, violence is not simply a mindless representation of aggression that can be understood in quantitative terms. There is a variety and complexity of the mythical patterns involved in the representation of violence in popular culture and it is all very much a tribute paid to oral modes of memorising extensive content.

There is no doubt that writing itself – and the literary stage of human development - restructured consciousness, being a technology, an artificiality that exteriorises thought, alienates the self from nature and by allowing for individuation, from other selves, by allowing the development of lists, facts, science; texts between people, producing reorganised societies of text that – like Plato noted – “cannot defend themselves”. But the world of modern media is not that of writing, not anymore. Culture seems more and more visual and aural, more oral than literate. Even the super-hero stories spread from comic books into TV series and movies.

Walter J. Ong believed that this is not a sudden twist, but rather the admission of an underlying truth. All communication is perfectly embedded in the basic orality of language, which is a permanent quality, by which he means that the great majority of the world's languages are not written, that traces of orality have been present in all languages throughout the ages and that reading normally consists of transmuting the inscribed word into sound, either

interiorly in the imagination or exteriorly aloud. Along comes the concept of the secondary orality.

Ong states, that:

Secondary orality is founded on – though it departs from – the individualized introversion of the age of writing, print and rationalism which intervened between it and primary orality and which remains as part of us. History is deposited permanently, but not unalterably as personality structure.¹⁰

For Ong, anthropology combines the study of culture, consciousness and communication – the three conceptual centres of the humanities. He associates primary orality with open systems thinking because it projects openness and is open existentially. He also associates voxelized literacy with closed systems thinking because it fosters closure and greater control, and finally, he associates secondary orality (or literate orality) with open closure. Writing and print require separateness and closure but are also open and liberate, leading to new thought process.

He says, that instead of the linearity of print-based texts, infinitely recoverable and structurally complex, the new media provide us with increasingly formulaic and fragmentary texts, recognisable and understandable on a single hearing or viewing. Their appeal is to the group rather than to the individual. They offer a shared rather than a private experience. What distinguishes secondary orality from primary orality is its continuing dependence on the analytical, technical and narrative skills that in turn depend on print (recording, streaming). Secondary orality is a displaced orality. This sense of displacement is indicated by a recasting of the formula by the planned spontaneity of group experiences. The new orality is action-oriented and thus is oriented towards the future, not to the past.

Moreover, Ong states that:

This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well.¹¹

¹⁰ W. J. Ong, *The Literate Orality of Popular Culture*, [in:] *Ong, Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture*, Cornell 1971, p. 285.

¹¹ Idem, *Orality and Literacy. Technologizing the Word*, London and New York 1982, p. 136, as quoted in: E. Ed, B. E. Gronbeck, T. J. Farrell, P. A. Soukup, op. cit.

Therefore secondary orality is founded on the individualised introversion and resides in between primary, communal orality and the solitary, written word. It is extremely visible in the modern media, from television to the Internet, media which are narcissistic, but also participatory. While the audience is displaced in a real sense of fiction, the identity of the experience that a single shared viewing creates is a powerful force for the community.

In the internet era, content is no longer fixed in space and there is no need for indexing. Electronic media are changing the nature of print space and our notion of what information is. No longer, in electronic media, do we have the concept of the fixed location of a word (that is, fixed for all time). Rather we have the idea of digital space as being a temporary, changeable location. It goes well with all we know about classical mythologies, being a “cloud” of stories linked to each other in different manners and orders, staying in constant motion and dynamics.

In other words, Ong styles contemporary electronic culture as a “secondary orality” indicating his view that the electronic age revives many features of a culture primarily oral. This is logical, since radio, film and television revive the dominant role of oral expression, aural reception, and active, physical events. In the culture of anxiety, as in primary oral culture, people are turned toward an outer standard of judgment – not the shared and stable standard of oral tradition but the outer, variable standards of other people and their judgments.

Rhetoric – the mode of communication developed in oral culture and very much present in modern Western culture – in Ong’s view is an intermediate stage between the unconscious mythical past and the conscious control of maturity reflected in contemporary individualism. As a media technology, displaced by newer dominant media, rhetoric came to specialise in “the birth of a hero”, denoting the “rise of masculinity and the personalized ego”. The connection between adolescence and the heroic quest of rhetoric seems to be one of the major modern day narratives, and psychoanalysts consistently note the heroic quest as a marked symbolic stage of adolescent development.¹² This is also one of the reasons why young adults and adolescents become involved in super-hero and fantasy stories that are a series of narratives on transformation and the coming of age.

The struggle with personal integrity and social performance dominates key forms of advertising and consumerism, not to mention sitcoms, medical

¹² B. Bettelheim, *Cudowne i pożyteczne. O znaczeniach i wartościach baśni*, tłum. D. Danek, Warszawa 2010; W. J. Ong, *The Literate Orality...*, op. cit.

or police dramas, romances and to some extent virtually every other dramatic form in the modern media. Heroic quests and romantic individualism are prevalent themes in the socialisation of adolescents in Western culture, and nonconformity to traditional expectations of character and maturity is the main issue among those themes. Social performance and evaluation are very much in the minds of adolescents and maturing adults in our culture.

The rhetoric of identity and character in which this culture appears to be steeped suggests that young members of society sustain a much prolonged adolescent quest for selfhood and autonomy. The struggle and its resultant anxiety might be also true for more than the adolescents and maturing adults of our culture – it might speak to everyone who thinks of life as an endless stretch of development, growth, improvement, re-defining and the possible ongoing change of status. This idea of endless growth seems to be one of the most common, current beliefs, or perhaps myths?

Secular societies and post-scientific societies do not share a common religious myth or ideal. There is the melting pot of a multicultural society. The official ideal is that there is equal rights and equal representation for everyone, yet the reality does not always match such a hypothesis. Public displays of religious icons and symbols have been in many cases outlawed.

Given the diversity of religious beliefs there is a need for shared secular symbols and some common values. This shared sphere could be the superheroes who embody the ideals of many religions and borrow from many different myths. Also the heroes of various fantastic tales are conveniently not connected to any formal cults or organised religions – they are almost self-consciously secular. They seem stripped from the sacred and made for the mass market. Yet if we look deeper, we can easily trace their religious roots. We can also show how science, which became a substitute for the sacred, transformed beings who might have been conceived of as supernatural in an earlier era and turned them into superheroes or fantastic characters with science-based origin stories that speak to contemporary culture.

The societies worship them as if they were sacred, and it happens in a temple-like movie palaces they pay to enter. Anthropologist might say they pay homage to them, purchase totems of their superheroes, showcase them, place them like idols on altars.

The theme of science is one of the other important modern myths. It often considers the “power device” behind the superhero or science-fiction plots, but this so-called science bears a striking resemblance to old-school magic and to the classical concept of a supernatural power, secretly underlying the visible world and manifesting itself in places, objects and beings (*mana*). Superheroes

are a part of a long continuum of people with special powers whose existence dates back to the earliest times. It is not incidental that a new breed of heroes was created in the Twentieth century, witnessing the major expansion of science along with its both destructive and healing power and the rapid decline of religions hold.

Sharon Parker argues, that:

The history of science is rife with examples of promise and peril. The science-fiction fans were aware of these potentials and pitfalls. Later readers and writers learned even more about science and technology, both from science books and sometimes even from superhero stories. Like the capricious gods and goddesses who populated the pantheon of classical Greece twentieth century science could be the portal to the greatest good or worst evil. It all depends on who holds the key and who opens the door. Looking from afar, it seemed as though science deserved to be worshipped as a god, as unscientific as that sounds. No wonder why so many superheroes trace their origins to intentional or accidental science experiments.¹³

Scientific concepts and terms are introduced freely in pop-cultural narratives and used to create atmosphere and add background detail to artwork – but the science itself is at best only superficially plausible, and the prevailing mood is mystical rather than rational.

Roland Barthes explains how modern culture could be seen and understood as secondarily natural (as “nature”). It supposedly forms a cosmology that allows us to explain political and social structures.¹⁴ The magical attributes of science help to deliver that image.

To conclude with a decent example, I could quote Richard Reynolds, who states, that:

This mythologizing of the dangers of scientific knowledge is one of the mainstream currents of science fiction, from Frankenstein through to the famous Spock/McCoy reason/conscience conflict in Star Trek (a conflict which is spuriously resolved by the *dues ex machine* of Kirk's overarching humanity, which embraces such contradictions and thereby resolves them.) However, the more radical split of knowledge and conscience which is signified by comic book supervillains cannot be so easily reconciled within the confines of the genre. A villain such as Joker continues, year after year, story after story, sabotaging the social order in an endless treadmill of destruction, which Batman struggles to control and contain.¹⁵

¹³ S. Parker, *Superheroes and Superegos. Analyzing the Minds Behind the Masks*, Santa Barbara, 2010, pp. 76–77.

¹⁴ R. Barthes, *Mitologie*, tłum. K. Kłosiński, Warszawa 2010, introduction.

¹⁵ R. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–24.

As we can see, there are some distinctive, current beliefs, persistent in popular culture, embedded in various narratives, that resemble myth. My final remark is, that if we approach these narratives with “secondary orality” thesis in mind, we can see their true, mythical potential, call them myths, and investigate them as such. Therefore to add the notion of *communitas*, as seen both by the classics of anthropology and by the academics that investigate communication in the realm new media – and to fully and equally acknowledge the audience’s feedback – this could be an interesting way to expand research on the modern myth as well as our understanding of storytelling as such.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Barthes R., *Mitologie*, tłum. K. Kłosiński, Warszawa 2010.
2. Bettelheim B., *Cudowne i pożyteczne. O znaczeniach i wartościach baśni*, tłum. D. Danek, Warszawa 2010.
3. Cawelti C. J., *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture*, Wisconsin 2004.
4. Goody J., *Mit, rytuał i oralność*, tłum. O. Kaczmarek, Warszawa 2012
5. Ed. E., Gronbeck B. E., Farrell T. J., Soukup P. A., *Media, Consciousness and Culture. Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, London 1991.
6. Klock G., *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, Continuum, New York 2002.
7. Lévi-Strauss C., *Mysł nieoswojona*, tłum. A. Zajączkowski, Warszawa 1962.
8. McLuhan M., *Wybór tekstów*, tłum. E. Różalska, J. M. Stokłosa, Poznań 2001.
9. Ong W. J., *Orality and Literacy. Technologizing the Word*, London and New York 1982
10. Ong W. J., *The Literate Orality of Popular Culture*, Cornell 1971.
11. Parker S., *Superheroes and Superegos. Analyzing the Minds Behind the Masks*, Santa Barbara 2010.
12. Reynolds R., *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, London 1992.
13. Szyjewski A., *Etnologia religii*, Kraków 2001.
14. Todorov T., *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Cornell 1975.
15. Todorov T., *Teorie symbolu*, tłum. T. Stróżyński, Gdańsk 2012.
16. Turner V., *The Ritual Process. Structure and Antistructure*, Chicago 1969.
17. Turner V. *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, New York 1967.