

The Neomythology of the Diffused New Religiosity: Hyper-technology, magical wealth and self-redefinition

By Ioannis Xidakis*

Introduction

Douglas Cowan, who specialized in the religious studies and sociology of religion, talking about modern man's relationship with myth, points out that the new media create and enhance a "secondary world" of "mythic imagination"¹. The plots of those media form a dynamic cultural reality ("fantasy culture"), equally familiar and unfamiliar with everyday reality, that is full of creatures possessing incredible skills and capabilities². Thus, Gowan highlights an important dimension of myth, which has already been identified and acknowledged in the 20th century by scholars specialized in its study, like Mircea Eliade³, Kenneth Burke⁴, and Paul Ricoeur⁵. As such, myth does not belong exclusively to the past. 20th and 21st centuries civilizations are full of mythical representations

* Ioannis Xidakis holds a PhD from the School of Theology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

1. D. E. Cowan, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture*, University of California Press, Oakland 2019, pp. xiv, 3, 7, 11, 23, 192-193.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. xiv, 3, 7, 11, 120.

3. M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, transl. W. R. Trask, Harper & Row Publishers, New York 1963, p. 6.

4. K. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays of Life, Literature and Method*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1966, pp. 51, 381, 212, 18, 20, 21, 384, 385, 386.

5. P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, transl. Emerson Buchanan, Beacon Press Books, Boston 1969.

and symbolisms. Modern entertainment and recreation products, like video games and cinema, are dominated by the mythical element, which is shaped in such a way as to satisfy contemporary people's needs and desires and to balance between fantasy and reason.

The plots of those entertainment products introduce their users – operators, viewers, or players– into a universe that on the surface may resemble the normative, social, and physical reality in which they participate and have been designed according to the standards, and cause-effect relationships of the real world, while at the same time, a whole new world emerges.

It is worth noting that, in this world, notions, situations, and goods with which modern people are familiar, like technology, money, and self-understanding, are used as parts of the creation of those new imaginary realities. At the same time, though, they are co-related and combined in new ways, and through this new co-relationship they acquire new content.

In other words, real and imaginary elements co-exist in science fiction movies, video games, and comics. Indeed, the way that these elements co-exist and the patterns resulting from the co-existence of the credible with the incredible –in our case, the patterns of technology, money, and the self-refer to and are integrated into the major features of the new mythology. This new mythology constitutes part of the new diffused religiosity, that plays a catalytic role within modern society because it is also expressed by the new media.

For example, in the 2014 science fiction action film *Lucy*, the relationship of the titular character with herself, her friends, and her enemies, and in general with the reality surrounding her, permits us to discern certain repeated motives that are intimately connected with the way the plot unfolds:

1. At the beginning of her adventure, Lucy is just a simple, ordinary person and a bit gullible; she lives alone in a city [Taipei], a stranger among strangers, without suspecting the danger that slowly is engulfing her; her ordeal begins from the moment that a criminal organization [Kkangpae] uses her to smuggle to Europe a dangerous synthetic drug..

2. The gang acts like a company; it possesses a managing board, chairman, senior and other staff, and a corporate statute. The drug is a product for sale, and the company wishes to exploit it commercially.

3. This substance, accidentally released into Lucy's body, genetically mutates her. She survives after the drug's intake and through this, she acquires enhanced mental and physical capabilities. She changes her body appearance at will, exerts influence on other people's bodies and minds through telepathy and telekinesis, and knows their physiology through and through as well as their present and future illnesses.

4. These powers evolved to the point of her total self-fulfillment, to almost acquiring a God-like status. At this point, she fully controls time's dimensions – past, present, and future.

5. Technology acquires new dimensions and new meanings, in parallel with her evolution. It is presented without further explanation as a possessor of hyper-technology, a means by which she automatically and effortlessly saves people's lives and reveals the secrets of the universe. At the end of the movie, Lucy's body "changes into a black substance that begins spreading over computers and other electronic objects in the lab, transforming them into one next-generation supercomputer", thus offering the scientists a new hard disc drive containing the answers to all their scientific aporias. Through her new identity, she is capable of existing simultaneously at multiple time points, eventually meeting the oldest ancestor of humankind. Typical of her situation are her words when she is reaching the end of her journey – and the movie's last scene: "*I am everywhere*", "*Life was given to us a billion years ago. Now you know what to do with it*"⁶.

"New self", "new body", "hyper-technology", and "money" –all basic elements of Lucy's plot– also leave their indelible mark on the virtual universe of the TV series *Altered Carbon* (2018). According to the latter's plot:

- i. Wealth directly ensures eternity.

6. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Lucy", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy_\(2014_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy_(2014_film)) [19.09.2023].

ii. The body is just an instrument, like money, for securing eternal life.
iii. The body's external features are conventional and secondary elements that can be profoundly altered. What is truly important is the self; the body simply functions as the individual consciousness's temporary "sleeve".

iv. Technology as hyper-technology is the decisive factor and the context for the development of the self if two conditions are satisfied: a) "money wealth" and b) the availability of bodies. Thus, the magical possibility of immortality is secured.

v. Everything in the series –the process of securing immortality and eternity, the existence and the activity of various superhuman beings– are presented as scientific and rational elements, even if they recall terms, notions, and names from past mythologies (for example, the class of the immortal nouveaux riches is called "Meths", about Methuselah⁷).

This paper's aim is to exactly highlight a mythic space, which is developed and reproduced within the context of the diffused new religiosity. Yet, this particular context as well as the mythology that is unfolding within it are characterized by both diffuseness and permeability. In other words, the mythology that is directly related to the new religiosity is diffuse and permeable in equal measure: it is characterized by its great span and range, that is by its spread and constant reproduction of its central motives within the framework of contemporary civilization⁸, but also by its capability to express itself in multiple ways through many and diverse media –cinema, internet, video games– and subsequently to transform itself, depending on each medium's dynamics. During this process, we can observe in an interdependent way the repetition of motives like "self", "hyper-technology", and "magical wealth": each one of the notions mentioned above is connected with the other within the context of a structured mythology.

7. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Altered Carbon", *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Altered Carbon", [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altered_Carbon_\(TV_series\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altered_Carbon_(TV_series)) (20.09.2023).

8. See also St. Papalexandropoulos, «Ἡ Διάχυτη Νέα Θρησκευτικότητα», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 11-22, 13.

The stages of our research which reflect our purpose are the following:

a. Initially, we define neo-mythology as part of the diffused new religiosity; we subsequently proceed to categorize and describe the essential aspects of the neo-mythological space, which of course is distinguished by its complexity.

b. After having located and described those motives and having conceptualized neo-mythology, that is contemporary mythology, we intend to partially demonstrate how neo-mythology functions as directly related to the new media and the latter's multifarious dynamics.

c. Subsequently, and this constitutes the core of our endeavor, we wish to locate and highlight the ways that the plots of video games, comics, and science fiction films represent hyper-technology, magic wealth, and the dimension of the self.

The method we've adopted in fulfilling our purpose is three-dimensional: a) systematical: we categorize the neo-mythological and neo-religious features into seven basic motives; b) analytical: we analyze the plot elements of various entertainment products to locate in them the ways technology, wealth and the self are displayed as complementary concepts; c) historical, especially regarding the neo-mythological examples, whose presentation is based on their historical development and formation. In other words, the examples provided here, helping us to discern how the patterns of neo-mythology and the diffused new religiosity are imprinted in contemporary entertainment products, are presented in the order they first appear, from the 1980's onwards.

As we shall see from our analysis and the examples we're going to present here, contemporary mythology's formation is based on popular culture products. This mythology unfolds within a porous and permeable framework and is reinforced by the diffused religiosity, while it also repeats its structural features.

Neo-mythology

By the term "neo-mythology", we specify all mythic worlds that someone can come into contact with while he/she is watching a science fiction

film, reading a comic with relevant material, or playing a video game. The mythical worlds expressed through the new media are created with material based on religious terms and symbols and drawn from histories related to religious and mythological persons. The material of traditional religiosity and mythology –gods, heroes, words, and concepts like “soul” and “salvation”– is detached from its original locus and recreated through comics, films, etc. with specific ways, i.e. defined combinations of traditional elements between them but also with other mythological elements of the new diffused religiosity, like the concept of the living universe, the self-power, etc.

A new dynamic mythological place is formed, based on exactly these combinations; despite its liquid and diverse nature, it is marked by certain repeated, and therefore basic, themes, to which we’ve already referred in some of our previous articles in combination with the features of New Religiosity⁹, yet to understand better the neo-mythological space, which is our research area concerns the concepts of “hyper-technology”, “magic wealth”, and “self”, we think that it is necessary to repeat them in a more condensed way:

A. The inclusion of the absolute, that is the divine, within the world. This divine element, as presented in the various neo-mythological products, is definitely not something utterly alien, something that lies beyond history, matter, or the world. On the contrary, it is “secularized” – located and confined within the natural world’s realm¹⁰.

B. By the same token, within the framework of neo-mythology and diffused religiosity, we can detect the following: 1. Manifestation of cosmic elements (cosmic energy, the universe, the living planet, cosmic hylozoic entities, like fire or water); 2. The action of superheroes

9. Io. Xidakis, «Ἱεροὶ χώροι στὸν κόσμο τῶν βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 51-83; “Neomythology: A New Religious Mythology”, *Religions*, 13, 6 (June 2022), 536, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060536> [22.09.2023]; «Μετανεωτεριστικότητα καὶ Διάχυτη Θρησκευτικότητα», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 92, 1 (2021), pp. 151-178.

10. St. Papalexandropoulos, «Νέα Ἐποχή: Ἡ θρησκευτολογικὴ ταυτότητα ἐνὸς κινήματος (δεύτερο μέρος)», *Ἐξοδος/Exodos* 7 (1992), pp. 41-61, 50-51; «Οἱ Νέες Θρησκείες: Ἱστορικὴ ἐπισκόπηση καὶ συστηματικὴ θεώρηση» in: St. Papalexandropoulos, (ed.), *Δοκίμια Ἱστορίας τῶν Θρησκειῶν*, Hellenika Grammata Publications, Athens 1997, pp. 168-169.

(Superman is the most characteristic example – in any case, he is just the first of the bunch)¹¹; 3. The presence of extraterrestrial beings (angels, gods, spacemen, etc.); 4. The existence of other dimensions and parallel universes (fourth dimension, or even alternative ones) and of superior life forms (the inner self or the real human being); 5. The special powers and the magical/supernatural apparitions of those beings or situations are “scientificized”, that is explained in rational, “scientific” terms, and are always identified with the natural space and its elements¹².

C. A product of the inclusion of divine, transcendental elements in the material and explainable world is the objectification of the divine: God is perceived as an object that will reinforce a positive situation or induce a negative one, help or cause harm to someone. Therefore, as a consequence of this approach, the supernatural, in the sense of magic, is instrumentalized.

After all, this is the reason why in video games, which constitute basic neo-mythological products, we likewise observe: gods acting like the protagonist’s assistants, divinities to be classified as superior or inferior, dragons and magic crystals, temples and laboratories, and living planets to be identified with the absolute¹³.

The absolute is presented as supernatural, superior, more powerful, purer, and wiser, overcoming the digital hero who may be vulnerable, sick, or amnesiac. Yet it is always something material that shares the same world with the hero, just located at a higher level than him. The absolute, that is the divine, precisely because of this quality, can function as an immediate, visible, and tangible means of the digital

11. A. D. Lewis, *American Comics, Literary Theory, and Religion: The Superhero Afterlife*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014, p. 23.

12. Papalexandropoulos, *Δοκίμια Ἱστορίας τῶν Θρησκειῶν*, *ibid.*, pp. 168-169; «Νέα Ἐποχή: Ἡ θρησκευολογικὴ ταυτότητα ἐνὸς κινήματος», (δεύτερο μέρος), *ibid.*, p. 150. Regarding the history and the characteristics of secularization within the framework of new religiosity, see W. J. Hanegraaff, “New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian’s Perspective”, *Social Compass* 46, 2 (1999), pp. 145–160, 146, <http://scpsagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/46/2/145> [22.09.2023].

13. Ιο. Χιδάκης, *Τὸ Καλὸ καὶ τὸ Κακὸ στὸν Κόσμο τῶν Βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν: Θρησκευολογικὴ Μελέτη*, diss., Athens 2018, p. 316, <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/43668> [23.09.2023].

hero's salvation, by granting him superpowers. In this way, the successful virtual hero who is under the control of the player-user will be upgraded within the limits of his virtual reality, exactly because he will acquire God-like powers as well as magical and divine instruments, providing him automatically with solutions.

D. Within this intramundane framework, religion appears as an organization, as a multinational company, and quite often as an impersonal one¹⁴. Again, according to the video games' plots, magic is identified with science, while as far as playing is concerned, it is presented in a calculating-statistical way. This means that, according to the screenplay, the magical capabilities of a virtual character are explainable and displayed on the screen with diagrams and numbers.

E. If we take into account this last parameter –the ways that science and technology are perceived–, we see that within the framework of neo-mythology, and more generally of the diffused religiosity, complex and multifaceted co-relations are developing between the religious and the scientific element.

Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe locate the connection, even the identification of the religious with the scientific, therefore of magic, with the technological element, within the limits of contemporary diffused religiosity. This is the reason why they speak of a) new mythology –the “mythology of evolution” –which, as is the case with science– is governed by rules and presents tangible results¹⁵; b) a “new science”, which is based on magic, and through this communicates with other, nonhuman beings¹⁶; c) a mythological-pseudoscientific space where everything is possible: as a result of an evolutionary and upgrading process, the human species can attain godly status from the moment that the universe is moving in the same direction¹⁷.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 171-176.

15. I. Hexham & K. Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred*, Westview Press, Colorado 1997, pp. 92, 93.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Similarly, Wouter J. Hanegraaff speaks of “new science” and “mythology of science”, and refers to the tendency developed by those who are inspired by the diffused religiosity’s messages: a) to question “official” science; b) to support the existence of new science, which would be able to acknowledge the divine element that has the world as its habitat; c) to regard science as a space where all things are interconnected with each other¹⁸; – thus, not only the secrets of the matter but those of the spirit or consciousness can be explained with rational thought (as if it were the knowledge of nature)¹⁹.

F. The image of the superhero is displayed, following the pattern of the previously mentioned motive; having acknowledged and accepted the into-the-world divine element with all its manifestations, he will act as an accelerator of the changes: with his actions, he will instigate a new social, technological, planetary, and ecological future for his mythical world. Therefore, along with the motive of the “chosen” hero, it equally dominates the vision for another world, for a new space and time, for a new historical era.

G. The history of civilization, the past mythologies, and the religious teachings and beliefs within neo-mythology’s multi-faceted space are all used to the full extent and each time in a new way. To put it in other words, all things are determined in advance and adjust accordingly to the plot of each contemporary mythological product. Within the neo-mythology’s framework, the history of civilization as a sequence of events and everything it includes –myths, legends, and traditions–, turn into raw material for a new, alternative version of it to be narrated, for a new history of mankind to be revealed though it²⁰.

It is worth noting that the player of the strategy video game *Civilization* (Sid Meier, Bruce Shelley, 1991 et seq.) can experience the Germanic tribes’ total defeat at the hands of the Roman army²¹, while in another

18. W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age religion and Western culture: esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*, E. J. Brill, New York 1996, pp. 62, 63, 398, 407, 421, 423, 517; “New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian’s Perspective”, op.cit., pp. 153, 154.

19. W. J. Hanegraaff, “New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: a Historian’s Perspective”, op.cit., pp. 155, 156, 158.

20. See also Xidakis, *Τὸ Καλὸ καὶ τὸ Καχὸ στὸν Κόσμο τῶν Βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν*, op.cit.

21. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Civilization (series)”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/>

game, *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, (Bethesda Softworks 2014), Germany's victory in the Second World War²².

Therefore, in video games and, more generally, plot constructions, mythical and religious elements –elements and properties of past mythologies and traditional religiosity–, are present in all the new media; yet, at the same time, they are reformulated and relocated within a new mythical framework. It is exactly this element of modern mythology's pervasive presence in the new media that showcases yet another structural motive of neo-mythology: its diffuse and permeable nature.

The diffuse and permeable nature of modern myths

The comics with superheroes constitute a whole new mythology, overcrowded as they are with alternative worlds and spaces full of supernatural beings. On the other hand, science fiction movies and television series enrich their mythical world by referring to other examples belonging to the same genre and relating them to elements of their plot construction. In this way, “*What if...*” (2021), an animated anthology series created by Marvel Comics and Marvel Cinematic Universe, refers to “Death Star”, the imperial space station featured in the *Star Wars* Franchise (1977 et seq.), as a potential instrument, as a weapon that can stop Ultron, the universe's destroyer²³. Similarly, Marvel, the series' heroine, during her battle against Ultron, calls him “Skynet”, which is the name of the destructive and malevolent AI in the *Terminator* franchise²⁴.

Yet this feature of modern mythology is inextricably linked with a new medium that first appeared in the 1970s – video games. Those are distinct from other media in the entertainment industry, like cinema, television, or comics, mainly because of the way they function. Based on their interactive

wiki/Civilization_(series) [25.09.2023].

22. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Wolfenstein: The New Order”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfenstein:_The_New_Order [25.09.2023].

23. *What if...?*. 2023. S1 E8, “What if... Ultron Won?”, 13:10, Directed by Bryan Andrews, first screening 29 Σεπτεμβρίου 2021, in: <https://www.disneyplus.com/el-gr/series/what-if/7672ZVj1ZxU9>.

24. *Ibid.*, S1E8, 8:17.

environments, videogames simulate believable or plausible worlds; at the same time, they create a multitude of mythical realities. Now, within the neo-mythological context, which finds its dynamic expression through those products, dominate motives that previously characterized partially movies, books, or comics, which are acknowledged by many scholars as distinctive elements of the new religiosity and, more specifically, of the contemporary diffused religiosity, which largely constitutes modern mythology's cultural framework²⁵.

Exactly because of their mechanism, video games are moving along three axes: a) they use past religious traditions and myths in their plots; b) they redefine those myths by combining them with motives of contemporary religiosity; c) through this combination of motives, they support the appearance of new myths.

Thus, within the digital entertainment context, we can observe the appearance of supernatural beings, heroes and divinities, and good and bad characters, which sometimes help their virtual reality as personal gods, while some other times –and this happens in most of the cases– are inclined to do evil, to act violently and aggressively. This is, in essence, one of the video games' central motives, and it is transferred to the big screen or the superhero comics. On the other hand, we find that what is characterized in the plot as abstract divinity –indifferent to and independent of the world–, is usually identified with the good. Similarly, another motive that is present in the digital world, the image of the “living earth”, depends on the traditional image of Mother Earth, but also on the neo-religious image of the living planet, as well as the environmental and ecological movements of the 1970s. Yet, within the plots of video games, it is usually presented as restricted within an in-the-world context, therefore it is approached with scientific or rather pseudo-scientific terms; the same goes for the image of the “other world”, or even magic, which is acknowledged as hyper-technology²⁶.

Those motives, even if they appear to be created from the reproduction of older myths or draw their inspiration from them, are mainly arising

25. See also Xidakis, «Ἱεροὶ χώροι στὸν κόσμον τῶν βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν», *ibid.*, p. 64 et seq.

26. Xidakis, *Τὸ Καλὸ καὶ τὸ Κακὸ στὸν Κόσμον τῶν Βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν...*, *ibid.*

through the ways they are perceived by the diffused new religiosity; combined with the appearance of the new media, they are constantly acquiring new dimensions. Of course, within neo-mythology's spectrum, the changes a mythic world might undergo regarding its main features –the image of the superhero, the concepts of good and evil, etc.– or its secondary ones –the highlighting of the wealth, the technology or the self– in the same product (e.g., a video game), affects the way this particular feature will also be presented in other products of the entertainment industry, like comics.

In any case, this liquidity and diffusion of the altered elements exhibit neo-mythology's porous nature: myths not only remain alive in contemporary culture but also penetrate continuously the new media, are adaptive to their basic characteristics, and are transformative. For example, in superhero comics, myth and the element of phantasy are combined with reality, from the moment that the supernatural beings, the central characters of those comics, do not belong somewhere else but, according to their plots, as superhuman, magicians or hyper-technologists are living among human beings. Again, through the medium of cinema, the myths produced and reproduced by comics acquire verisimilitude or plausibility. Finally, in video games, myths become interactive with the players/heroes. In other words, and this is something we would like to emphasize, all new mediums of the entertainment industry borrow myths from one or more of their central motives. We could say that the new mediums act like myths' "filters", "adaptors" and "amplifiers".

The way this whole process evolves, confirms the presence of two elements: a) we may discern motives of the New Religiosity in modern myths; b) according to the expressive medium, myths also exhibit new motives, adapted to the respective medium. The new mythological elements are now an integral part of the new myths' identity when these are transposed to another medium and are expressed through it.

In this way, modern myths, like the new-religiousness's myth about the existence of extraterrestrial beings and civilizations, appear in different guises in the various media. The change that they will undergo depending on the medium that projects them each time, they will keep it the next time they will be included in another medium's

plot. For example, in the film *Jupiter Ascending* (2015), the myth about extraterrestrials and the relevant myth about the existence of ancient astronauts gain some new dynamics as they connect with the model of the modern woman. This model draws elements from the traditional motive of the Mother Goddess, but in the end, it is being adapted to the needs of a science fiction movie – indeed, of a movie that was shot in the 2010s²⁷. In the video games *The Death and Return of Superman* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1994)²⁸ and *Injustice: Gods Among Us* (NetherRealm Studios, 2013)²⁹, the way that Superman is presented, as the superhero that dies or justifies his aggressiveness, greatly affects in its turn the ways that this mythological figure will be represented in other popular culture genres, like cinema.

The neo-mythology's porousness, and its ability to find various ways of expression, reveal a third quality it possesses: a myth does not only adapt to the needs of the new medium but also exploits the latter to reinforce the appearance of another one – video games is one of the most characteristic cases.

Kevin Schut in his article, "They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality", having studied the ways video games capture in their plots religious and mythical elements, shows that their mechanistic function plays a catalytic role. Yet, as he also mentions, because they have been composed as *cybertexts*, that leads inevitably to the enfeeblement of the divine factor and its integration in a computerized context³⁰.

27. See also *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Jupiter Ascending", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jupiter_Ascending [28.09.2023]. Cf. the plot of the science fiction movie Captain Marvel and the role of the protagonist bearing the same name, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Captain Marvel", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_Marvel_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_Marvel_(film)) [16.11.2023].

28. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "The Death and Return of Superman", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Death_and_Return_of_Superman [28.09.2023].

29. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Injustice: Gods Among Us", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Injustice:_Gods_Among_Us [28.09.2023].

30. K. Schut, "They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality" in: H. A. Campbell & Gr. Price Grieve (eds.), *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis 2014, pp. 255-275, 272-273.

We partially agree with Scut's view: in the realm of virtual reality, the divine, the magic, and the religious elements appear as being adapted to the demands of the new medium; they are explained and integrated into an explainable, probable, and believable world. Nevertheless, this tendency to integrate the divine into the secular world and to explain or approach it with scientific or, rather, pseudo-scientific terms is also a general cultural tendency, especially from the 1970s and 1980s onwards.

In other words, within the computerized/calculating environment based on cause-and-effect relationships, and within the context of the new myths composed by video games, we could observe the following trends: a) the divine element is interpreted, or even modified, exclusively on secular, worldly terms, and its nature is prone to alteration or distortion; b) hyper technology is presented as a way of automatically solving any problem, that is as magic; c) the player/hero, can immediately and radically alter his virtual environment, save worlds, kill supernatural beings, play with the limits of good and evil, acquire everything, and change and upgrade his self – to the degree that storyline permits him to do so.

“Hyper technology”, “Magic Wealth”, and “Self” in the neo-mythological worlds

We've previously referred to the motives that are shaped within the limits of neo-mythology. At this point, and based on certain examples drawn by popular culture, we will examine how different products of the entertainment industry are inspired or influenced by the main motives that are present in neo-mythology and new religiosity, thus reproducing the latter's essential features. Furthermore, and this is the most important thing, we will refer to the dominant role that the motives “self”, “magic wealth”, and “hyper technology” play in the narrative and storylines of various neo-mythological products, as well as the ways they have been repeated and connected themselves. Their relationship is not accidental; as we've already seen with the neo-mythology paradigm, all motives are connected in ways that not only are justified by the plot's unfolding but also are expected from the product's users.

The first example we're going to use is William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which was published in 1984. It is the earliest and one of the best works belonging to the cyberpunk genre, while its writer was the one who coined the term "cyberspace", an interconnected digital environment, a space constructed by computer graphics where computer processing systems are depicted as creatures. The brains of cyberspace's users are interconnected directly with this digital reality through the appropriate interface.

Neuromancer, therefore, is an important neo-mythological creation, as it describes the function of a network, and more precisely, a computer matrix. Having this as its base, it presents a string of characters that wish to negate and get rid of their bodily appearance to become a part of the new technology's virtual reality. In this global network environment, human and artificial intelligence are intertwined. The first discovers the limits of its digital self – another facet of its identity. The second, *Neuromancer*, which is the Wintermute's sibling AI, reaches the limits of its self-consciousness and becomes the first of a digital minds' tribe³¹.

Matrix's plot and storyline further develop *Neuromancer*'s narrative arches, especially regarding the notion of the self and its relationship with technology and money, by using various instruments and the concept of updating. Matrix is an emblematic science fiction film, but equally impressive is the way it represents the new myth: in an apocalyptic future when machines have already beaten humans and trapped humans' intelligence in a computer network and virtual reality (Matrix), a prophetess (The Oracle) and a pupil of hers (Morpheus), discover the human race's savior (Neo or The One), who controls the

31. W. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Ace Books, 1984. See also W. Sims Bainbridge, "Literary Representations" in: W. Sims Bainbridge (ed.), *Berkshire encyclopedia of human-computer interaction*, vol. 1, Berkshire Publishing Group, Mass. 2004, pp. 431-439, 434; St. E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York 2008, pp. 11-13, 81; L. Kendall, "Cybercommunities" in: W. Sims Bainbridge (ed.), *Berkshire encyclopedia of human-computer interaction*, vol. 1, Berkshire Publishing Group, Mass. 2004, pp. 133-141, 133; Er. Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, 5-Star, New York 2004, p. 233; Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2001, p. 52.

machine's technology using superhuman powers, and with Trinity's –his companion– assistance, fights the machines and his archenemy, Agent Smith, “an AI program in the Matrix that has been programmed to keep order within the system by terminating human simulacra that would bring instability to the simulated reality, as well as any rogue programs that no longer serve a purpose to the Machine collective” At the very end, he bows to The Architect, “a highly specialized program of the Machine world, as well as the creator of the Matrix. As the primary superintendent of the system, he is possibly a collective manifestation or perhaps a virtual representation of the entire Machine mainframe”, a computer program that has reached self-consciousness and like a digital god has created the virtual world. After his submission, Nio sacrifices himself to save Zion, the city of humans, inaugurating a new relationship between humans and machines³².

Based on *Matrix's* narrative construction and plot, we may discern an interesting mythical reality in which:

a. The hero's identity –and, along with it, human nature– is redefined, as it hovers between the virtual and the real world.

b. The main hero, but also every character that has access to the virtual world, controls a “second self”, which in its essence does not constitute something entirely different from it, but is another aspect of it.

c. The bodies themselves are redefined and their entrance into the network affords them superhuman powers, putting them into an ideal situation, in which they are capable of doing everything – running unstoppably, flying, withstanding hard strikes and beatings, having the lightning ability to avoid shotguns, resurrecting, remaining beautiful, young, healthy, almost eternal.

d. Technology is almighty; it appears either in the form of infinite weapons and various instruments or of virtual reality; it possesses intelligence and functions as an instrument of humans' salvation or punishment; it creates tribes, clans, and castes of artificial-virtual beings. At the end of the plot, these hyper-technology beings re-create a world

32. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Matrix”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Matrix (30.09.2023); Laurence Coupe, *Myth*, Routledge, Abingdon ²2009, pp. 191-192.

anew and discover human nature's limits, even the value of emotions vis a vis square logic.

e. The battle between machines and humans depends not only on the chosen hero's qualities or hyper-technology's powers but also on the accumulation of advanced weapons and magical objects, from the characters' immediate and rapid acquirement of capabilities and skills like flying planes, using motorcycles, flying machines and using complex machinery. In *Matrix's* cinematic universe –especially *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), the fourth installment of the franchise– all these are goods ready for consumption, selling, and buying³³. while at the same time, they secure those heroes' constant upgrading. The concept of self-upgrading through virtual wealth and technology is a familiar neo-mythological motive; it is also the way concepts like “self”, “technology” and “money” appear as interconnected and complementary in the plots of many movies, video games, and comics.

Therefore, *Matrix* through a combination of rational and irrational elements produces a modern myth. At the same time, it reproduces many of the diffused religiosity and neo-mythology's patterns: the secularization of the divine; the projection of hyper-technology and an alternative view of reality and history; the arbitrary use of religious terms and concepts.

In comics, like those published by Marvel and DC, which are full of myths and heroic adventures, we can recognize similar features and motives:

a. Gods who owe their powers to a new technology, that is in their hyper-technology, as Gods of Asgard³⁴, but also Gods-creators, like Gaea/Mother Earth, which is depicted as the incarnation of life, vegetation,

33. “The Analyst”, the protagonists' archenemy, in a scene from *The Matrix Resurrections* (1:35.43) says that Neo's and Trinity's resurrection cost him “the double amount of time and the double money”: *The Matrix Resurrections*, directed by L. Wachowski. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2021, 2 hr., 28 min., <https://tv.apple.com/gr/movie/the-matrix-resurrections/umc.cmc.1xfut1sq2hvb9faupyabxog7q?action=play>.

34. M. Teitelbaum & M. Forbeck, “Gods of Asgard”, in: Al. Dougall (ed.), *Marvel Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Characters of the Marvel Universe*, DK Publishing, New York 2014, pp. 148-149.

and the natural life cycle³⁵. Especially in Gaea's case, the concept of ecology, already familiar from the neo-religious space, is combined with that of hyper-technology³⁶, to the point that Gaea, although a Goddess of vegetation, is depicted as the creator of the technological civilization of Asgardia – an extraterrestrial society³⁷.

b. Supernatural characters who can alter themselves, shift to every shape they want, and play with their body and gender limits. Goddess Hathor-Sekhmet is one of the most characteristic cases; initially, she appears to possess a female form, but in later versions of her story she also possesses male ones. The gender changes depend on the reactions and the behavior of her subjects towards her. In any case, when she/he acts as a “female” deity, is impulsive, and full of intense, mainly negative, emotions, while when he/she transforms into a “male” one, she/he mainly takes the role of the ruler and God-protector³⁸.

God Death (Marvel Comics) is one of those shapeshifter beings, someone capable of changing its body and transforming itself. Apart from his body, though, he is equally adaptive regarding his ethics – he either seeks to destroy the universe, or appears to complement Eternity, another divine and sexless creature, who embodies life. More specifically, when Death appears as a “woman”, her looks are terrifying and she is scheming, while when she appears as a “girl”, her body shape is softer, and she is distinguished by her gentler demeanor³⁹.

35. T. Brevoort & M. Forbeck, “Gaea”, in: Al. Dougall (ed.), *Marvel Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Characters of the Marvel Universe*, *ibid.*, p. 142.

36. C. Campbell, “The Easternisation of the West”, in: Br. Wilson & J. Cresswell (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, Routledge, London 2001, pp. 35-48, 39; J. A. Beckford, “The mass media and New Religious Movements”, *ibid.*, pp. 103-119, 112.

37. *Fandom*, s.v. “Gaea (Earth-616): All Mother of Asgardia”, n.d., [https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Gaea_\(Earth-616\)#All-Mother_of_Asgardia](https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Gaea_(Earth-616)#All-Mother_of_Asgardia) [02.09.2023].

38. *Fandom*, s.v. “Hathor-Sekhmet (Earth-616)”, n.d., [https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Hathor-Sekhmet_\(Earth-616\)](https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Hathor-Sekhmet_(Earth-616)) [02.09.2023]; “Lion God (Hathor-Sekhmet)”, <https://moviecomicswhoswho.wordpress.com/2022/07/18/lion-god-hathor-sekhmet/> [23.09.2023].

39. A. Darling & M. Forbeck, “Death”, in: Al. Dougall (ed.), *Marvel Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Characters of the Marvel Universe*, *ibid.*, p. 104; *Fandom*, s.v. “Death (Earth-616)”, n.d., [https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Death_\(Earth-616\)](https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Death_(Earth-616)) [03.09.2023].

c. Tech addicts and scientists, like Batman⁴⁰ and Mobius⁴¹, ἀλλὰ καὶ but also magicians like Doctor Strange⁴², who used magic as science, that is systematized, codified, organized, and applicable knowledge *visa vis* reality.

At this point, we have to highlight the presence of two special features of the diffused religiosity and modern mythology, from the moment that their repetition within the whole spectrum of neo-mythology emphatically reveals their structural role:

Firstly, it's the projection of another sort of science, a new science, which can simultaneously function as the traditional magic, that is arbitrarily and automatically producing negative or positive results. When we've previously referred to neo-mythology's motives, we talked about the reevaluation and the questioning of science, and the reinforcement of a pseudo-scientific context. DC and Marvel comics follow the same pattern: their fictional worlds become part of a space –both mythological and pseudo-scientific– where everything is possible: Gods are handling technological achievements, humans turn into superhumans due to technology and magic, bodies are transformed, and the limits of the self are redefined and reoriented.

Secondly, and as a consequence of the first element, that is the projection of new science, a dominant feature is the inclusion of the divine and transcendental element in the material and explainable world. In other words, the superior and divine element we see in neo-mythological plots in no way constitutes something irredeemably alien – the “Other”. The metaphysical and transcendental framework is abandoned, while the storylines are based on realistic and secular terms. In this way, gods and humans are integrated into a superhuman space, which, as far as its origins, existence, objectives, and pursuits are concerned, is perceived as credible and believable.

40. M. Manning, “Batman”, in: C. Ridout (ed.), *The DC Comics Encyclopedia: the Definitive Guide to the Characters of the DC Universe*, Dorling Kindersley, London 2016, pp. 28-30.

41. M. Manning, “Anti-Monitor”, in: C. Ridout (ed.), *The DC Comics Encyclopedia: the Definitive Guide to the Characters of the DC Universe*, *ibid.*, p. 15.

42. P. Sanderson & M. Forbeck, “Doctor Strange”, in: Al. Dougall (ed.), *Marvel Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Characters of the Marvel Universe*, *ibid.*, p. 112.

This reality –credible and believable– identifies the imaginary worlds of the videogames, even concerning the accumulation of money and wealth. Golden coins hidden in bricks, like in *Mario* games (Nintendo, 1983-2023), shining rings scattered through countless virtual levels, like in *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sega, 1991-2023), stars flooding the platforms, like in *Kirby's Adventure* (Nintendo, 1993), red apples popping out of chests or coffers, like in *Crash Bandicoot* (1996-2023), are the gains that, according to the games' rationale, the digital hero is obliged to acquire. Through the search of the virtual environment, the sequence of the algorithms, and the sequence of battles, the virtual character learns the value of the digital money, irrespective of its form. He learns to appreciate it as a medium for developing his skills but also as a marker that verifies his abilities. In any case, here we have the verification of the motive: Wealth permits the automatic acquisition of hyper-technology, new potent powers, or a combination of those two; the nature of wealth as a magic medium is the agent that transforms the central character of the videogames into a “supernatural” hero. This is precisely the motive of neo-mythology and diffuse religiosity, but also a process that within the context of virtual reality is characterized as the central character's upgrading⁴³.

The most famous virtual villain who acts on the slogan “greed is profitable”, is Wario, the evil twin brother of the popular video game hero Mario. More specifically, in *Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3*, Wario does everything he can to acquire enough money to buy his much-desired castle. Through the actual playing and the script, it becomes obvious that his only reason for him to exist is to become richer and richer. Thus, for wealth's sake and its accumulation, he eliminates his adversaries, explores and destroys parts of its virtual place, upgrades his powers, and discovers treasures; he proves that he is the best of them all. At the end of the game and the plot of *Super Mario Land 3*, he is willing to give to a jinni all his golden coins to gain or to lose everything, to acquire a planet, or to take as a gift an unworthy birdhouse⁴⁴.

43. Io. Xidakis, *Τὸ Καλὸ καὶ τὸ Κακὸ στὸν Κόσμο τῶν Βιντεοπαιχνιδῶν*, *ibid.*, p. 148ff.

44. “Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3”, https://www.mariowiki.com/Wario_Land:_

In the video game *Postal III* (Trashmasters 2011), the central character, The Postal Dude, reminds us of the consumer mania and Mario's paradox situation, as being capable of reaching the uppermost echelons of the capitalist system – to becoming America's richest man and President of the U.S.A., and after that, in a moment of madness, to put an end to everything, by causing a nuclear holocaust and uttering the phrase: "I regret nothing"⁴⁵.

Burnout (Criterion Games, 2001-2018), a series of racing video games, confirms a rule mentioned above: through his action within the virtual environment for the achievement of the final victory, the character obtains wealth, and this virtual wealth reinforces the action cycle. The player-character in every game of the series tries to reach first with his car at the finish line, having passed the other drivers. His reward after every quick victory he wins is digital money, which he will use afterward to be properly prepared in advance for his next race. The game's mechanism encourages him to participate in consecutive races to accumulate money, which, in the form of credit units, he will spend to buy new cars, new hyper-technological machinery, additional decorative stuff, and better auto parts, thus securing that in his next race care this cycle of speed, victory, profit, wealth and upgrading will be repeated.

As far as the element of upgrading is concerned, we could observe that, just as in the previous two games, money, especially its acquisition and accumulation, is equal to the modification of the central character's –Wario's or Dude's– capabilities; thus, in the *Burnout* race games, wealth ultimately brings about the change of the qualities of the car, which, in this game, is the player/hero's extension.

We realize, therefore, a modern tendency that is reflected in video games, comics, novels, and action and science fiction movies according to which: a) concepts and notions of the traditional religions' teachings are present, like the battle between good and evil, and the motives of creation, destruction, and salvation of the world; b) past myths, like the heroic

Super_Mario_Land_3, 04.10.2023. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wario_Land:_Super_Mario_Land_3 [04.09.2023].

45. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Postal III", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postal_III [05.09.2023].

ones, are reinterpreted and reoriented within the boundaries of a new mythical space, and c) those myths are combined with new mythological expressions or reflections –e.g., the “myth of extraterrestrials”– or the projection of a new science and a magic technology.

As we’ve already seen in the example aforementioned, a repeated subject within this process is the co-relation of the concept of self with those of hyper-technology and magical wealth. Indeed, the way they co-related, enables us to acknowledge a subsequent motive: “Magic”, “technology” and “wealth”, are the instruments with which the protagonists of those new imaginary worlds are aiming to change themselves or even redefine the limits of human nature itself.

In this way –with the creation of new myths, based upon particular motives and integrated into new mythical products–, neo-mythology is ultimately derived as a space where a new religiosity is applied, but also as one of the latter’s most visible features.

Conclusion

The field of video games and their characters, and animation and science fiction films, is dominated by myth. It would not be an exaggeration if we were to say that the plots and the storylines of those entertainment industry genres are mythological products: they reproduce older mythological patterns and produce new myths. This reproduction and production of mythical elements, and especially the way with which mythical elements are combined, lead us to the wider neo-mythological space and the religious context to which the latter belongs – the diffused new religiosity.

Based on the motives of this neo-mythological space, we can observe the following:

Firstly, the protagonists in the respective plots and storylines are various fighters and samurai, extraterrestrials, angels, demons, superior and inferior gods, scientists possessing magical capabilities, and magicians who declare themselves scientists. All these appear to give their battles

in laboratories and modern cities, but also in temples, underground and obscure dungeons, magical woods, faraway planets. Yet, everything within the framework of these products and the virtual world they create, functions on the base of cause-effect relations, even if the characters, like gods and heroes, initially are pointing to the transcendence of the physical laws. To phrase it otherwise, all the imaginary and mythical elements are disguised with the clothes of secularization and science, capable of immediate decipherment, and for that reason credible enough.

Secondly, the newly formed neo-mythology is permeable – capable of adapting itself to the new media, to absorb and make use of their features.

Thirdly, the elements of past mythologies and traditional religiosity are present in the plots of modern popular cultural products, but they are reformulated. The ways that this reformulation is taking place shows beyond any doubt those products' interdependence with the neo-mythological patterns and therefore with diffused religiosity. During this formation process of new myths, an alternative view of technology is projected, a new self is redefined, and the importance and value of wealth are reformulated.

Magic technology, superheroes, the concept of the self's upgrading, and the reconceptualization of cultural elements are patterns common enough in diffused religiosity. Nevertheless, the most interesting thing is that these elements also constitute common patterns of various neo-mythological plots, while their repetition, spread, and interconnectivity within the context of the new media plots take place most naturally: the user/player of each new medium is ready to accept the new ways with which new technology is presented as hyper-technology, the wealth as a medium of upgrading, even his/her self as a field of continuous evolution and constant mutations. The repetition of those features in mediums and products of the entertainment industry confirms the spread of a polymorphous mythical element in the realm of modern culture, and its immediate and widespread reception from the modern man, while at the same time bears witness to the existence of a "modern mythology" – the diffused and permeable neo-mythology.