

Myths and the perception of gender in culture and society

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Thesis: How do myths shape the perception of gender in culture and society?

Abstract

In this paper, a thorough study on myths and how these shape the perception of gender in culture and society will be presented. In the first place, a detailed section on myths, which includes their origins, history and entailed messages as well as their understanding, will be exposed. As a result, a section of culture and how it's shaped through myths will pick up the theories of Barthes on the impact of myths on society and the meanings these imply in different cultures.

A second section to the paper will focus on gender, relating the topic strictly to myths. In this section, different theories on gender will be included and a detailed relation of this topic to myths and how these ground the roles of men and women in society will be expressed. For this section, the works of van Zoonen, Milestone, Meyer, and Connell, among others is analyzed. Finally, several conclusions regarding the relation between these two topics will be draw up, thus responding to the original thesis on 'how do myths shape the perception of gender in culture and society?'

Introduction

Myths are one of the main concerns of the sociological studies of culture. Throughout history, many cultures and societies have seen their base shaped through these figures. Therefore, it has always been a topic of interest for scholars in the sector of sociology trying to decipher the impact certain beliefs and practices have on individuals and their environment.

In this paper, the main focus will shine light on the perception of gender in advanced capitalist societies with a lens of mythology. The main aim here is to see how myths shape this perception. In order to achieve optimal results, a thorough study on myths and different aspects of these will be presented. In the first place, an elaborate definition of myths will be exposed, followed by a brief summary of the origins of these as well as their history. Subsequently, a detailed explanation of the messages conveyed by myths and the process of understanding them, making reference to Barthes, Saussure and Chandler, among others will follow.

This introduction in which 'myths', their history and their understanding are exposed will lead to a section under the title of "Culture shaped through myths". In it, the theory of Barthes regarding the impact of these figures on culture and the messages that lay within them, which shape societies, will be presented with five significant illustrations from Barthe's 'Mythologies'.

Thereupon, a section regarding gender will succeed the previous. In this section under the title "Gender established through myths", the roles of men and women as established by society will be presented, sustained by the assertions of scholars such as van Zoonen, Milestone, Meyer, or Connell, among others. Here too, different myths on the roles of men and women will be illustrated in order to further understand how these figures shape the perception of gender.

Finally, some conclusions respecting the roles of men and women established in society and their connection to myths will be draw up. Furthermore, the relation between myths and the way they shape the perception of gender in society will be established, thus answering the initial query of the investigation.

Myths

The term 'myth' is usually associated with beliefs that are demonstrably false, as for example, the Ancient World (Chandler, 2006), but as Lakoff states, myths play a big role in aiding us at making sense of our experiences within culture, as do metaphors (Birenbaum, 1988). It could be stated that myths composed a way of perceiving and understanding the world. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, mythic thought is "a system of concepts embedded in images" (Birenbaum, 1988).

According to Barthes, the myth is "a system of communication; [...] it's a message" and therefore, anything "can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society"; meaning that anything can become a myth since, as he states, "if it's talked about, it can be myth" (1991). But not only does it has to be talked about, it should also have a meaning given to it.

Therefore, their ultimate function is to "naturalize the culture" or, in other words, "to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely 'natural', 'normal', self-evident, timeless, obvious 'common-sense' - and thus objective and 'true' reflections of 'the way things are'" (Chandler, 2006).

Origins of the myth

The origin of the term "myth" dates back to the period of the Ancient Greece. For the Greeks, the term '*muthos*' referred to a tale or something one pronounced, be it a statement, a story, or even the plot of a play (Kirk, 1973, 8). Plato was the first to use the term '*muthologia*' to refer to the art of telling stories (Kirk, 1973, 8). In Greek mythology, stories such as that of Oedipus and Iocaste, Perseus and Medusa or Apollo and Daphne portrayed the image that "all myths are about gods, or defined from rituals" but this is proved wrong if these myths are analyzed. Although they do regard gods and supernatural forces, as is the case for examples of Oedipus' future being determined by the Oracle of Apollo, there is also the essence of "man moving in a human environment" with Oedipus taking human actions and having human desires (Kirk, 1973,9). This relates to the etymological theory "aimed at creating impressions that myths 'make sense'" by giving these stories meaning (Dundes, 1984, 45), in this case both divine and human.

Other theories establish that the meaning of the original definition of the myth lies on the allegory. This is so in cases where myths served as an allegorical explanation "based on natural phenomena", as would be the representation of 'fire' through Apollo, or "based on spiritual qualities" (Dundes, 1984, 44). The later can be exemplified through the figures of Athena and Aphrodite representing 'wise judgment' and 'desire' respectively (Dundes, 1984, 44).

The origin of myth has also been explained through the Greek mythologist Euhemerus' interpretation, which established that gods had developed from the biographies of human beings (Dundes, 1984, 45). Similar to this theory is that of the "historical interpretation" which established a comparison and some times even derivation of Greek myths from other myths in Egypt (Dundes, 1984, 45).

Myth in history

Throughout history, myths have been created, established, adopted, and interiorized in different societies. Not only have myths been present throughout history, but they have also shaped history in some way by contributing to the creation or reinforcement of culture. From the Ancient Greece until today, myth has been present in countless civilizations, societies and cultures.

In a vast majority of regions around the five continents, mythology is still present today. In Africa, specifically in South Sudan, Dinka mythology is still alive referring to the myth of Dinka and Nuer (Lincoln, 1989, 21-25), which explains how the father of these two promised to give a cow to Dinka and a calf to Nuer, but Dinka deceived their father by taking the calf and provoked the perpetual hate of Nuer up to today. Through this

myth, the rivalry in the territory was explained and grounded. Somalia is also marked by Somali mythology, which has an extensive history, but, unlike the Dinka mythology in South Sudan, it has been transformed because of growing Islam in the region (Hanghe, 1998).

In Asia, Buddhist mythology ruled (and still rules) the South of Asia and is characterized by myths of the Yaksha, which are natural spirits and the Yidam, which is a meditation deity (Joseph, 2003). On the other hand, Chinese mythology, unlike Buddhist mythology, is very complex. Myths in China range from those of the Stars, of the Thunder, Lightning, Wind and Rain, those of the Waters, of Fire, or even those of Epidemics, Medicine, and Exorcism (Werner, 2005). Chinese mythology also mystifies creatures such as dragons, fish, birds, mammalian animals, etc.



Figure 1. Yaksha representation image



Figure 2. Yidam representation image

In North America, mythology was ruled by Native American myths from the Algonquian, the Muskogean and Iroquois (Erdoes et.al, 1984). In South America, although many mythologies co-existed in different parts of the territory, the Incan mythology, which defined the region of the Andes, had a great influence (Osborne, 1997). It based its beliefs on the creation of humanity in the myth of Viracocha, god that ascended from the seas to create live beings, but discontent with his creation, flooded the Earth morphing it and then created the human race with a size similar to his and he created trees and plants as well.

In Europe, mythology finds its origins in the Ancient Greece, as mentioned previously. The Classical Antiquity in Europe set the base for mythology although it was strictly connected to religious beliefs. Roman mythology overtook the European geography after the Greeks. A famous myth that was said to overthrow the early monarchy and set the Roman Republic was that of Lucretia (Donaldson, 1982), which shows how myths too were used to create political spaces.

Although the Ancient Mythology established some of the bases for European mythology at a general level and introduced and established the term, other mythologies around the territory exceeded the Ancient world; from Sami mythology in the northern regions of Finland to the Basque myth of the Lamiaks (Douglass, 1989). English mythology saw a great transformation during the medieval times, when many myths were spread and established in society (Leeming, 2003). So did the rest of the European territory at the time, where new myths were born to persist until today as is the case of the Catalan Sant Jordi or the Slavic Maslenitsa, both still traditionally celebrated today.

But from the Classical Antiquity until now, mythology has undergone great transformations: from referring to religious deities, to depicting the prowess of kings and knights, to the modern myth.

The message behind the myth

Barthes explains how an image can easily imply a message comparable to one transmitted through written language. Furthermore, he establishes that it can even be more "imperative than writing" because it contains within it significant *lexis* (Barthes, 1991).

Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. This substance is not unimportant: pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it. But this is no longer a constitutive difference. Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a *lexis*.

With this idea of images and messages containing *lexis*, Barthes asserts that the myth belongs to Semiology (1991). Simultaneously, he states that this science studies the signification apart from the content of myths (Barthes, 1991). It must be taken into account that Semiotics "postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified" (Barthes, 1991) in order to make sense of a sign. This last term can refer to "words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects" but these "become signs only when we invest them with meaning" (Chandler, 2006).

Saussure elaborated on this theory of semiotics and presented a 'dyadic' model of the sign composed of a 'signifier' which made reference to "the form which the sign takes" and a 'signified' that related to "the concept it represents" (Chandler, 2006). In his introduction to Semiotics, Chandler depicts the previous explanation of the semiologist with the following images. The first one illustrates the definition of Saussure while the second one exemplifies the later.

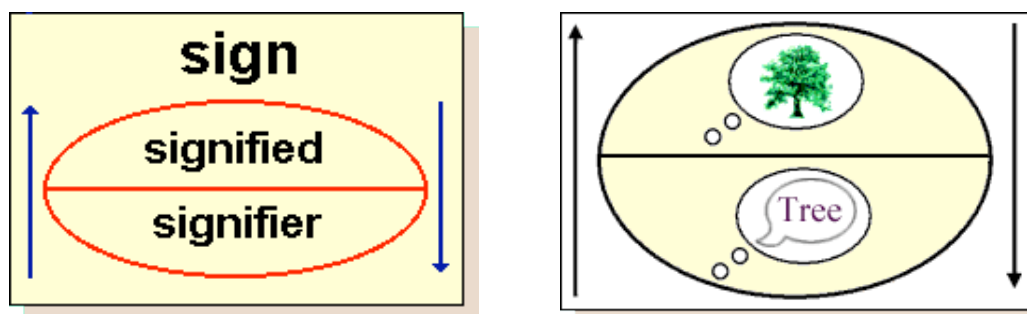


Figure 3. Images from Daniel Chandler's chapter on Signs in the book *Semiotics for Beginners*.

Taking into account Saussure's theory establishing that the sign is composed of a signifier and a signified, Barthes asserts that myths contain within them the following tri-dimensional pattern: "the signifier, the signified and the sign" but they are a "second-

order semiological system", which means that the sign in the first system becomes the signifier in the second (1991, 113). In order to depict this visually, Barthes exposes the following illustration in his study.

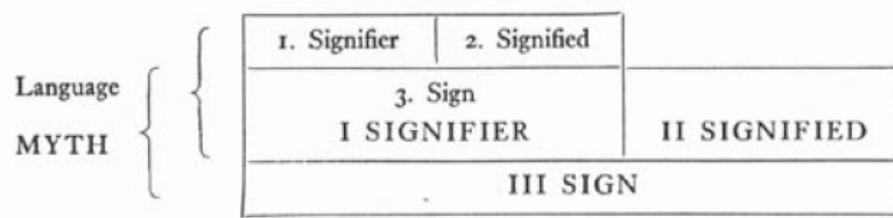


Figure 4. Diagram from Barthes chapter on "Myth as a semiological system in" *Mythologies*

Es a further explanation to this diagram, Barthes establishes that the signifier of the myth regards the meaning and the form while the signified of it makes reference to a "motivation which causes the myth to be uttered" (1991). Furthermore, he establishes that the signification in this pattern "is the myth itself, just as the Saussuran sign is the word" (1991).

Understanding myths

Daniel Chandler asserted in his book on Semiotics that the power of myths "is that they 'go without saying' and so appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted or demystified" (2004, 145). Therefore, it's important to notice the necessity to decipher, interpret and demystify myths in order to understand them.

In order to understand myths, one must learn to read and decipher them. Making sense of meanings can be done, according to Barthes through three different types of readings (1991). The first one indicates that all focus should be on an empty signifier in order to have the concept delineate the myth. This leads to the signification becoming literal again. In other words, this process resembles that in which one has an idea of a concept and then seeks a form for it (Barthes, 1991, 127). The second reading Barthes suggests implies focusing on the signifier. In this case, a meaning and form must be distinguished in order to then discover the distortion one imposes on the other. This means, according to the author, that once the myth is deciphered, then the distortion implied within it is understood (1991, 127). These two types of readings are categorized as static and analytical, unlike the last one, which is described as dynamic and consuming the myth (Barthes, 1991, 127). This last type of reading focuses on the mythical signifier "as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form" which leads to an ambiguous signification (Barthes, 1991, 127).

In order to understand signification, it should be noted, as many theorists state, that there's a denotative order of signification that just represents the object or idea, and a connotative order that possesses the values attached to the sign. The third order of signification that theorists claim is the mythological or ideological one, which represents the "major culturally-variable concepts underpinning a particular worldview" (Chandler, 2006). Therefore, myths are impregnated with signification that contains certain cultural values. Deciphering these values or the meaning of myths can

sometimes be challenging since individuals attempting this have too these values and ideas interiorized within them (Chandler, 2006).

Impact on society

According to Lincoln, myth is "a mode of discourse that may [...] be employed in the manner of ancestral invocations or, alternatively, in that of revolutionary slogans" (Lincoln, 1989, 21). Therefore, myths are the key to countless rooms inhabited by history and its figures, politics, societies, psychological understanding, etc. As Evans-Pitchard stated about the myth of Nuer and Dinka, the myth here is "a reflection of the political relations between two peoples" but it also calls for certain level of social integration (Lincoln, 1989, 21).

Culture shaped through myths

Culture has been defined by many as the characteristics of a particular social group defined by elements such as language, religion, art, and many other elements (Zimmermann, 2012). Culture is also perceived as "the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation" as Margaret Mead stated (Varenne, n.d.)

In a simple manner, Williams defined 'culture' as having three meanings. He stated that it could refer to "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic developments", to a "particular way of life of a group or historical period", or finally, it could refer to "texts and practices which produce meanings" (Milestone et.al., 2012, 2).

As mentioned above, the ultimate function of myths is to "naturalize the culture" by making "dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely 'natural'" (Chandler, 2006). Furthermore, myths establish the bases of society and social relationships. Lincoln asserts that through a process of repetition, social formations are constructed:

It is through the repeated *evocation* of such sentiments [referring to myths] via the *invocation* of select moments from the past that social identities are continually (re-) established and social formations (re-) constructed (1989, 23).

Similarly, Lincoln establishes that the often repetition of the "same authoritative story" can lead to establishing certain forms in society and maintaining these "regular and accustomed forms" in it (1989, 25). This relates to the fact that anyone who feels attached to certain past moment, can be consequently be attached to other who feel that same connection (Lincoln, 1989, 23). In this same line, Lincoln establishes that myths signify a story that a group of individuals regard as true but that both the speaker, as well as other members close to her or him think of as false (1989, 24) thus building up on the sense of community and social grouping. But myth is not only a tool to tell stories or a coding device to convey information; it is also a "discursive act through which actors evoke the sentiments out of which society is actively constructed" (Lincoln, 1989, 25)

In *Mythologies*, Barthes presents several examples that portray the process of giving meaning to certain signs in order to transform them into myths. Through 'Toys' and 'Plastic', he reflects on the substance of objects, although in the first one, he too discusses about toys being a mere reflection of reality reduced and simplified to fit the child's needs for understanding. On the other hand, through 'Steak and chips' and 'Wine and milk', he portrays the intrinsic messages implicit in these kinds of foods and drinks in certain contexts. These two sections focus on the historical and patriotic meaning of these signs. Furthermore, in 'Striptease', Barthes reflects upon exoticism and the sexual meaning of the details in the event of a striptease. Here he also refers to the perception of the woman, as he does in more detail in the section titled 'Novels and Children'. In the later section, he presents the myths established to generate and establish the roles of women.

'Toys', especially French toys, always have a meaning. According to Barthes, they mean "something socialized, constituted by myths or techniques of modern adult life" (1991); that is, they are a reduced representation of everyday adult's routines. Barthes exemplifies this idea of toys as "representations of life" with a doll that urinates, stating that this doll entails training girls to be housewives who will take care of their children (1991). According to the author, children use the world rather than create it with what he categorizes as 'French toys', those that represent life, but what he describes as 'block games' allow the child to create life and not only possess its representation (1991). Here too, Barthes discusses the issue between wooden and plastic toys, stating that the first is characterized by strength and durability while the other has no substance or essence (1991), topic that he discusses in detail in 'Plastic'.

'Plastic' focuses on the essence or substance of this overused material. Barthes establishes that the idea of this material being infinitely transformable defines it as "ubiquity made visible" (1991), apart from stating that it barely exists as substance. Regarding mythic reading, plastic highlights the myth of 'imitation' since in its transformable essence it serves to imitate materials as well as to make imitations of objects. Therefore, it substitutes both the substance and the matter thus abolishing the hierarchy of substances (Barthes, 1991).

'Steak and chips' as well as **'Wine and milk'** are a representation of national symbols and patriotism (Barthes, 1991). In the first place, steak has a sanguine mythology that resembles that of wine. It represents the heart of meat and it is meat in its purest state. Steak reminds of the strength of a bull. In it, blood is "visible, natural, and dense" thus it represents nature and morality according to Barthes (1991). Chips have the same nostalgic and patriotic essence as steak. In order to represent this, Barthes exposes the story of a General in Indo-China who ordered steak and chips as a symbol of nationality and patriotism, knowing that in that region this meal was uncommon (or even unknown). Therefore, Barthes states when exposing this example that "the General understood well [their] nation symbolism; he knew that 'la frite', are the alimentary sign of Frenchness" (1991). In regard to 'Wine and milk', it is established that, like steak and chips, wine is a clear symbol of the French. Just in the same way the meal described before is found all around France, so is wine (Barthes, 1991). As stated above, wine implies the same sanguine mythology as steak, giving it a vital symbolism of life. But, this drink too represents mutilation, surgical transmutation and delivery. According to Barthes, wine has yet another characteristic which is its "convertive substance"; meaning that it can make silent people enter a talkative trance. On the other hand,

Bachelard establishes that wine is the opposite of water. With this definition, Barthes goes on presenting the resemblance between water and milk, Dutch national symbol (1991). Milk, unlike wine, is characteristically cosmetic and restoring, and it is thought to join and cover. Therefore, it ultimately represents the "purity associated with the innocence of a child" as well as strength (1991).

'**Striptease**' is, according to Barthes, based on a contradiction that is that "woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked", therefore the myth of exoticism and eroticism that a striptease might imply is found in the "coverings placed upon the body of the woman" (1991). Furthermore, the author gives a clear example of these coverings representing the myth of eroticism by describing the g-string as follows:

"[the] ultimate triangle, by its pure and geometrical shape, by its hard and shiny material, bars the way to the sexual parts like a sword of purity, and definitely drives the woman back into a mineral world, the (precious) stone being here the irrefutable symbol of the absolute object, that which serves no purpose" (Barthes, 1991).

This implies the objectification of the woman in a clear manner and furthermore, it expresses a certain eroticism only accomplished through the garment of the woman's naked body. Barthes also argues that the dance involving a striptease represents mobility in contradiction (and in fray) with the fear of immobility (1991).

'**Novels and Children**' represents the uttermost expression of gender. Barthes presents how the magazine 'Elle' ties the adventures of art in literature to the pillars of the home by expressing that women serve to create, be it art or life. But, the belief of the woman to be strong and creative comes with a price. As Barthes exemplifies, the Muse has to "give its sublimity to the humble tasks of the home" and then she's rewarded with the myth of child-bearing (1991). The same case applies to those women who write. As Barthes states, women should "be therefore courageous, free; play at being men, write like them; but never get far from them; live under their gaze, compensate for [their] books by [their] children; enjoy a free rein for a while, but quickly come back to [their] condition. One novel, one child, a little feminism, a little connubiality" (1991). In this same line, 'Elle' transmits a message to women of self-confidence but lets men know that women will not leave them for all that that they get access to (Barthes, 1991). This clearly shows the roles of men and women established in society where women can rejoice but are tied to certain roles men impose. This is clearly summed up in the last paragraph of 'Novels and Children' where Barthes explains as follows:

In every feature of Elle we find this twofold action: lock the gynaeceum, then and only then release woman inside. Love, work, write, be business-women or women of letters, but always remember that man exists, and that you are not made like him; your order is free on condition that it depends on his; your freedom is a luxury, it is possible only if you first acknowledge the obligations of your nature. Write, if you want to, we women shall all be very proud of it; but don't forget on the other hand to produce children, for that is your destiny. A jesuitic morality: adapt the moral rule of your condition, but never compromise about the dogma on which it rests. (Barthes, 1991)

As seen, women have certain roles tattooed to their gender, these being producing children, taking care of them, loving their husbands; in other words, being good wives and mothers. According to what 'Elle' diffused this was what women were supposed to dedicate their lives to; this was their destiny, and if they rejoiced of the pleasure of

creating art, they could not only devote their lives to that. As mentioned above and quoting Barthes: "One novel, one child, a little feminism, a little connubiality" (1991).

Gender established through myths

Sociologists defined gender in the 1970's as "socially produced differences between being feminine and being masculine" (Holmes, 2007, 2). To this definition, Milestone and Meyer add that gender also entails the "socially imposed attributes and behaviors which are assigned to [masculinity and femininity] categories" (2012).

Goffman, on the other hand, defines gender as a performance and asserts that it is not an inherent identity found in individuals but rather the product of certain repeated practices and characteristics that have led up to labeling with two categories: masculine and feminine (Milestone et.al., 2012, 12-13). For him, masculinity and femininity are "gender roles which individual men and women perform [...] by constantly engaging in practices which are deemed typical and appropriate for men and women" (Milestone et.al., 2012, 12-13).

Likewise, West and Don Zimmerman assert that gender, and especially acting according to gender, is a routine instilled in daily activities which is embedded in society, therefore, following these social patterns requires no thought; it's an automatic activity (Milestone et.al., 2012, 13).

Gender is and has been a key element establishing the bases of society for long although it has been "marked by power struggles and inequalities" (Milestone et.al., 2012, 8). But, how does gender establish these bases? The answer is found in the three-process structure of culture that Milestone and Meyer present in their study on Gender and Popular Culture. Additionally, these processes, which involve production, representation and consumption, define the structure of popular culture in the following way:

Gender hierarchies and inequalities are maintained, among other factors, by meanings and belief systems, and these are in turn generated through representation. Representations are constructed through language, images and social practices, and possess a material as well as symbolic dimension. (Milestone et.al., 2012, 8)

The process of representation, which means to describe something or someone, is possibly the most important in establishing the perception of women and men in and by society. Representations construct the media through images and language which stand for something or someone and, like myths, create meaning (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 7).

Misrepresentation has led to a hegemonic patriarchy where the male is dominant and the female is submissive. This pattern is still present in advanced capitalist democracies, where the media plays an important role in maintaining patriarchy by sustaining and preserving gender ideologies (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 11). Media institutions are therefore, and as seen by van Zoonen, ideological tools producing sexist, capitalist and patriarchal content in order to influence individuals and shape society (2000).

Roles of women and men

Women and men have always been assigned roles within society. It could be asserted that society is established and maintained through the different roles undertaken by men and women, which determine the bases of social patterns. But, they don't share the same privilege when it comes to roles.

In advanced capitalist societies as well as in many other societies, men are dominant while women are subject to men. This social pattern is born from patriarchy, which refers to a system of male dominance (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 10), and all forms of it present in society serve uniquely to reinforce it. The media have played a key role in representing and portraying women and 'their roles' with movies, TV shows, books, soap operas, music, etc. (van Zoonen, 2000). On the other hand, politics has always been a space reserved to men and therefore they have tried to maintain it so by preaching a patriarchal ideology.

Women have always been assigned a role in society, as is seen exemplified previously in Barthes' 'Novels and Children' in *Mythologies*. Unfortunately, this role hasn't always been positive. For over centuries and well into contemporary culture, women have been subjected to a submissive role under male dominance (Milestone, et.al., 2012; van Zoonen, 2000; Annandale, et.al, 1996). In societies where a hegemonic patriarchy is present, women have little to no say, even if formally (i.e. voting, participating in politics) they appear to do so (Milestone, et.al., 2012). Milestone and Meyer present this underlying phenomenon in the following way:

Women are not directly excluded from the public sphere; they do have formal access to important institutions such as the labour market, politics or education and they are not legally prohibited from doing things which men do. There is formal equality. Instead, in a system of public patriarchy women are controlled indirectly and collectively.

According to the authors, this control over women is done through six structures, them being the household production, the organization of work (paid), the state, male violence, heterosexuality and cultural institutions (Milestone et. al., 2012, 11).

Household production is strictly reserved for women as this is supposed to be their area of domain. As Connell asserts, women's field was the private sphere while men's domain was the public sphere (2009). In the organization of work, women too see their professional lives being determined by others. Even the media tend to determine the professional life of women. There has been studies undertaken that clearly show the distinction between male and female roles within the work field. Heterosexuality is another key structure that aids in the maintenance of patriarchy. This sexuality trait is instilled in individuals once they become social and it's a constant in the environment. Once again, the media have played a big role in the diffusion and 'normalization' of this trait by producing heterosexual romantic movies or by making the plot of romantic novels a love story between a man and a woman (van Zoonen, 2000, 105-125).

Connell establishes that "[e]mphasized femininity centers on women's compliance with subordination and the accommodation of men's interests and desires" (Milestone et.al., 2012, 19) , as previously mentioned. She is subject to men and at the service of men. Women too, are presented as caring and willing to take care of children and men (Jackson, et.al., 2002). Society has decided that the female gender is supposed to take

care of the family and the household but, furthermore, has established that she rejoices in doing so. Connell emphasizes that female sexuality also differs from males'. Women are bound to emotions, relationships and commitment and not just physical pleasure. In his words, "women are said to want love and commitment while men seek sexual gratifications" (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 19). Although being a generalization, this statement and the truth it could convey, derives from the ideology that has been instilled in society.

Men, on the other hand, have also been assigned a role in society. In contemporary societies where patriarchy reigns, men are believed to be dominant and powerful and their roles are strictly bound to masculinity. As Connell asserts, masculinity represents the male as rational, adept and intelligent as well as strong and powerful physically, mentally and socially (2009). Men are also supposed to be active and tough as well as ambitious, assertive and competitive, especially in the work field (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 19).

Milestone and Meyer describe three types of masculinity as the 'old man', the 'new man' and the 'new lad'. The 'old man' refers to the traditional masculinity that governed in the 1940's and 1950's characterized by presenting the man as "strong, active, powerful, authoritative, hard, aggressive, violent, competitive and rational, and lacking sensitivity and emotions" (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 114). At the same time, this masculinity was strictly heterosexual where men were to seek the sexual conquest of women (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 115). Overall, the 'old man' established clear gender roles and social structures having men working and providing economical comfort to the family and household while women took care of the later. The 'new man', however, is described to be caring and sensitive and he shared the household tasks with women. This type of masculinity born in the 80's opposes the traditional 'old man' specially in the field of sexuality:

The new man is non-sexist, believes in gender equality and relates to women as human beings rather than sex objects. He is heterosexual but capable of having female friends and interested in female sexual pleasure as well as his own. (Milestone, et.al. 2012, 116)

Notwithstanding, this type of masculinity is the less popular in culture and is usually associated to certain groups like hippies, environmentalists or human rights activists, and not to the whole society (Milestone, et.al. 2012). Furthermore, the 'new lad' overtook the 'new man' in the 1980's and 1990's. But the 'new lad' is not as virtuous as the 'new man' since he is characterized by having interests such as drinking and sex and practicing them with aggressiveness (Milestone, et.al., 2012). Additionally, this masculinity is "defensively heterosexual", sexist and tends to objectify women (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 118).

In all three masculinities described by Milestone and Meyer, sexual drive is a constant. Masculine sexuality is perceived as opposite to female sexuality. While the myth established regarding women enacts that they are supposed to be innocent and sexually chaste and are said to "want love and commitment" (Milestone, et.al. 2012, 19), the myth of men alleges that they are characterized by a strong sexual drive which they need to satisfy (Connell, 2009). Violence and dominance are also associated with sexual performances of men, where women are subject to their aggressive actions (van Zoonen, 2000). The most explicit example that best depicts this masculine characteristic

is pornography (van Zoonen, 2000), although it can also be perceived less explicitly in Hollywood films.

Referring to the traditional masculinity, Connell establishes that it is hegemonic in two ways: being dominant over all other types of masculinities and being culturally idealized. The later refers to the fact that it integrates the attitudes and practices that are seen as correct and right for men, thus it is seen by society as the ideal masculine model (Connell, 2009).

Myth and the representation of women

Myths have been considered to "naturalize the culture" through the instilment of dominant values, attitudes, beliefs and social structures as the norm (Chandler, 2006). They have served to pin down the bases of society, the roles of individuals within society and the relationships to be established. Therefore, that myths have played a key role in the representation of women and their roles in contemporary culture, is not striking.

The myth of the sexually attractive, seductive and exotic female body has been constructed over years. The production and diffusion of this myth through the media has lead to shape contemporary societies where women are objects of desire for men. In western patriarchal culture, woman has been exposed as "a spectacle to be looked at" obviously by the male audience (van Zoonen, 2000, 87). In advertisements and photography women have become 'objectified' and so their bodies are just "decorative ingredients" lined with provocative fashion or sensual lingerie (van Zoonen, 2000, 87). Hollywood has also had its take in the establishment of the female body myth (van Zoonen, 2000, 87), producing movies in which women were depicted as sex-symbols and sometimes even as the 'trophy' of the male hero (as is the case in James Bond movies). In a sense, and as Milestone and Meyer state, women are "commonly defined through and reduced to their physical appearance" (2012, 87).



Figure 5. Budweiser commercial taken from Google image bank

Then again, above all, women are supposed to be "respectable"; meaning that they have to be sexually innocent, shy and modest in order to be feminine as the rules of society establish (Milestone et.al., 107). In order to be a virtuous woman, chastity and asexuality should be attained, but then again, women must always please men sexually according to the social norm. This contradiction depicts the male control over women

where she must be caste until he decides that she can stop being so, and when he makes that decision, she must cringe and please him.

The myth of women pertaining to the household has been widely spread and long established. As Milestone and Meyer state in *Gender and Popular Culture*, "men are associated with the public domain and the world of work, [while] women are associated with the private space of the domestic" (Milestone, et.al, 2012, 99). Women have even been denied the access to the public domain in the field of work for a long time (Jackson, et.al., 2002). But even if there have been changes where women now have access to higher education and professional life (van Zoonen, 2000), the household work is still associated to the female figure.

A clear example of how the myth of women pertaining to the household is instilled in society already in childhood relates to toys. As Barthes states in *Mythologies*, toys are representations of the real world and they intend to teach children about the real world (1991) and so, they are try to teach them about their roles in the real world. In order to find out how toys determine the roles of women, taking a look at toy advertisements is enough. Toys that are targeted at girls usually involve household tasks. So is the case with play-kitchens or baby dolls. Therefore, these innocent toys with which girls spend time playing are a tool to doctrinaire them and guide their path towards their future roles as mothers and household caretakers.



Figure 6. Representation of girl toys taken from the Google image bank under the search of "girl toys"

The myth of the 'heterosexual imaginary' is another well-established agenda that is instilled in individuals through socialization. Ingraham goes ahead and defines 'the heterosexual imaginary' and its effects in the following way:

The heterosexual imagery is that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution. The effect of this depiction of reality is that heterosexuality circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned, while gender is understood as socially constructed and central to the organization of everyday life. (Jackson, et.al., 2002, 79-84)

But heterosexuality is, according to Ott, a cultural construction used to describe the sexual drives of individuals (Ott, 2009), and being so, it is instilled in society through different means. The hegemony of this sexual orientation, like that of the dominant male, is sustained by the massive flow of media messages that project this idea. In sitcoms as well as in soap operas, the 'heteronormative hegemony' as Castro Varela

defines it (Castro Varela, 2011, 53), is excessively present. In soap operas, where the main audience is female, the plot is generally a heterosexual love story with all of its complications and outcomes, but anyhow heterosexual (van Zoonen, 2000, 117-121).

Myth and the representation of men

The dominance of men over women is a phenomenon well ground in contemporary culture. In a sense, myths have played a greatly important role in constituting a patriarchal model in society. The media and other institutions have insisted on rooting this model and thus they have accomplished their goal, attaining a social structure based on male and female distinction regarding their roles as well as their competences.

The myth of the hero is a constant in films, books and TV shows, among others. In romantic novels, for instance, the male hero is mocking, cynical and hostile to the heroine but this is so because he loves her (Irons, 1992, 21). Therefore, the assertion of this masculine superiority is interpreted by the reader as "a result of his increasingly intense love for the heroine" (Irons, 1992, 25), thus justifying it. This leads to a reinforcement of the male dominance and the female subjection since the tyrannical male actions are justified as a reaction to 'a good' action or feeling. But the hero is not just a hostile figure that despises women, on the contrary, he is a seducer, a 'player' and a man of action that fights evil and saves women from the dark. So is the case in James Bond movies. Fleming's James Bond is a call for male supremacy and triumph (Lindner, 2003, 169). The hero here is depicted as the elegant male that is strong, intelligent, clever and active.



Figure 7. Collage of different James Bond actors from the Google Image bank

The myth of sexual dominance and the way sexual practices are supposed to be undertaken by men is another key element in the shaping of culture and society. Sexuality is a topic that is strictly treated through the male perspective and in benefit of men, where they are portrayed as dominant and even using violence in their sexual acts to dominate the opposite sex, as is seen in many media.

In romantic novels, apart from the myth of male hero, sexuality is also present, where men use it in order to "punish and humiliate women" (Irons, 1992, 27). The intention to dominate and humiliate women is here disguised as sexual desire and thus transmitted as so to society (Irons, 1992, 28). This sustains confusion between male sexuality and

male violence, erasing the barrier that lies in between and merging these two actions in one under the label of being 'unproblematic'.

Going back to Fleming's James Bond, where sexuality is as important as the plot itself, it's worth highlighting that Bond's women are often objectified and their bodies are the objects of desire of the secret agent (Lindner, 2003, 169-172). Generally he conquers them through a game of seduction and goes to bed with women at the end of the plot, once he has achieved his goal of defeating evil. Therefore, women seem to be a 'prize' for the hard work the agent undertakes.

Pornography is the most explicit example of media diffusing the sexual male dominance and normalizing it in society. This genre objectifies women for the pleasure of men and, as van Zoonen asserts, it "contributes to the eroticization of power and violence" (2000). This eroticization leads to the construction of a masculine sexuality that is ever seeking pleasure through dominance (van Zoonen, 2000). Pornography is an expression of glorification of male power and it encourages men to treat women as sexual objects believing that they are powerless and submissive and thus reinforcing the patriarchal ideology present in contemporary culture (van Zoonen, 2000).

The myth of the businessman establishes that males are intended to provide for the household and the family through economy. Moreover, paid work has been a source of identity for men for many years (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 133). But this identity source has been challenged lately by the increase of temporary and part-time jobs as well as by the breakthrough of women into the work field. In a thorough analysis, Milestone and Meyer establish that men's magazines, which portray women as inferior in order to reinforce the feeling of superiority of men, counterattack this 'threat' of women entering the sector of paid work (2012, 134). Therefore, this serves as a tool to maintain the hegemony of superiority and thus of exceptional competence in the paid work field. On the other hand, media such as films or TV shows also portray the myth of the businessman or the workingman. So is the case in the example provided by Milestone and Meyer about hospital dramas on TV, where male doctors are portrayed as professionals with impeccable skills and an endless knowledge (2012, 136-137). Traditionally, in these dramas only men worked as doctors but in modern hospital dramas, women play a bigger role. However, hospital dramas "align men with power and knowledge by locating them in the world of work and positioning them in the prestigious role of the doctor" (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 139).

Conclusions

Myths have existed for countless centuries and have shaped innumerable societies. From the Ancient Civilizations to contemporary culture, myths have resolved the gaps in society with creations regarding gods, religions, battles, social problems, differences or inequalities, among others. Their main function is to "naturalize the culture" therefore grounding certain values, attitudes and beliefs with which a considerable number of individuals agree, into society (Chandler, 2006). Through the repetition of these myths, social identities are established, thus building on the construction of culture (Lincoln, 1989).

Roland Barthes brings myth closer to individuals throughout *Mythologies*. With 28 different stories or 'mythologies', Barthes depicts the impact of myths in society and their implicit meanings. Furthermore, in 'Myth Today' he explains how this process of deciphering myths works, allowing understanding better the intrinsic technique required to decode these stories. Additionally, with *Mythologies* he attempts to express how society and culture is shaped through myths, and he succeeds in doing so.

Regarding gender myths, several conclusions can be established. Although the field of gender is changing rapidly, a patriarchal system is still present in most advanced capitalist democracies. This system establishes that men are dominant and powerful over women, who are subjected to them. Therefore, male supremacy implies him working in the paid market, thus pertaining to the public sphere; being strong both physically and mentally and aggressive; and having a sexual desire that needs to be pleased by women. On the other hand, women belong to the household and are bound to take care of the family, thus to the private sphere; they are considered weak and submissive; and their sexual desire implies emotions rather than pure bodily desire.

The issue of sexuality and gender should be highlighted since through this aspect, the patriarchal system is clearly portrayed. Women are reduced to a sexual object of desire for men that serves his needs. Furthermore, masculine sexuality "seeks pleasure through violence and power" (van Zoonen, 2000) and thus the barrier between violence and pleasure has been erased.

The media have played a key role in inculcating these gender myths in contemporary society: from magazines to soap operas, romantic novels, books, TV shows, films and advertisements, among others. Thus, they are crucial in the shaping of culture since their products signify and "construct meanings through the use of language and images" (Milestone, et.al., 2012, 4) and they have successfully diffused myths on gender that have set the bases of contemporary society.

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