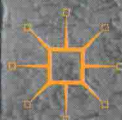


THE AMERICAN SUCCESS MYTH ON FILM

JULIE LEVINSON



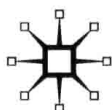
The American Success Myth on Film

Julie Levinson

Babson College, USA



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1

Top of the World: Cultural Narratives, Myths, and Movies

The invention of a myth is the founding act of a community's self-image.

– Manfred Beller, *Imagology*

It is an old story but, in all of its guises, a perennially appealing one. A poor boy makes good. A secretary marries her boss, thereby launching herself from the steno pool to the penthouse. A lowborn young man with a burning ambition and an idea that everyone tells him is crazy becomes a successful entrepreneur. A fresh-off-the-boat immigrant seizes the promise of the new world and reinvents himself as a dyed-in-the-wool American tycoon. These classic – if clichéd – success stories were already deeply etched in the popular consciousness by the time Hollywood put its stamp on them. Scores of self-help manuals, popular novels, religious tracts, and biographies have played their part in the ritual re-enactment of one of our most enduring cultural doctrines: that trading rags for riches is not only possible but is part of our national entitlement. The movies' particular contribution to the American idea of success has been to codify, perpetuate, amplify, and sometimes challenge that idea in notably complex ways.

The myth of success, with its fervid conviction that the opportunity for material attainment and spiritual fulfillment is every individual's birthright and is within each person's power, is central to American national identity. Our public discourse and our cultural artifacts exalt the archetype of the self-made man who, with determination, industriousness, and strategy, propels himself to the pinnacle of achievement. Since the eighteenth century, the success myth has been a key component of American master narratives: those resonant stories that seem to contain the essence of the nation and that get told and retold across

generations and genres. The myth's continuity and ubiquity attest to its strong hold on our national imagination and to its definitional role in our ongoing cultural conversation about what it means to be an American.

At its most basic, the success myth enshrines optimism and self-invention. Paradigmatic success myth stories involve ordinary young men who, through individual will and initiative, overcome their humble beginnings and all other hurdles to advancement. The myth tends to deny or downplay innate limitations, social constraints, or systemic obstacles while satisfying the hopeful belief that if an individual remains true to his aspirations, he will receive his just rewards. Just as Jay Gatsby, the most poignant of self-made men, persisted in his faith in 'something commensurate to his capacity for wonder,' the classic success myth hero keeps his eyes firmly fixed on the prize until, at last and inevitably, it becomes his.¹

The myth is so durable because its promise that individuals can remake themselves and can wield absolute agency over their own fate is so appealing. Americans, the myth insists, are self-authoring and autonomous. It is our personal choices, rather than our social status or conditions, that create our identity and destiny. This cornerstone of American thought is one of the fundamental aspects of our national imaginary: a locution that derives from historian Benedict Anderson's notion of nations as 'imagined communities' whose peoples are bound together by a common sense of experience and set of mores. In suggesting that a country's national imaginary is underpinned by a 'narrative of identity,'² he and other scholars of nationhood have argued that national identities are reinforced by a web of discursive practices that selectively distill the reality of our daily existence and that bind us in spite of our differences.³ Our sense of community and commonality is repeatedly instilled by the traditional stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves: our national myths. These myths are among the representations that acculturate us to a particular sense of the world and our place within it. In this view, national character, rather than being an essentialist predisposition to certain traits, is fostered by cultural constructs, among them rhetorical and narrational conventions which create, as much as they reflect, our collective sense of identity and ideals.

Ancient and contemporary myths

Myths are among the most enduring and resilient of those cultural constructs. In an essay linking the function of contemporary cultural

narratives to ancient myth, Bruce Lincoln claims that both are ‘the stories through which groups accomplish the task of sociocultural reproduction by inscribing their values and sense of shared identity on those who are its members-in-the-making so that they will come to know and remember just who they are and just where they belong.’⁴ Lincoln is among many theorists who insist that the term ‘myth’ denotes not simply a loose set of cultural beliefs. Rather, by definition, myths are ritually retold consensus narratives that exemplify cultural creeds, and that are marked by recurring conventions of plot, characterization, and causality.⁵ The success myth is related to, but distinct from, ‘The American Dream,’ because it couches the promises of that catchall idiom in specifically narrative form.⁶ A myth is differentiated by three essential attributes: its narrative structure, its status as a sacred truth for the culture, and its social function of affirming and relaying cultural norms and practices.

The methods of dissemination for contemporary myths may differ from the oral diffusion of pre-literate myths; rather than telling tales huddled around the light of a fire, we relay our mythic lore by the light of a flickering screen. But although the transmission of modern myth may differ in its formal qualities and its reach, the functions and structures of cultural narratives have much in common with classic myths, since narrative remains the primary way for human consciousness to articulate and make sense of our experiences. Like sacred myths in pre-modern cultures, our master narratives are tales of individuals that purport to explain larger phenomena and to articulate behavioral and aspirational norms, thereby creating social cohesion. And like all sustaining fictions that are deeply etched in a community’s collective psyche, they offer a particularly felicitous way to explore how a culture’s cherished stories and ideologies interact to consolidate – and perpetuate – a standardized, idealized set of values and self-images.

Many myth theorists have confronted the question of the extent to which contemporary cultural narratives correspond to pre-modern myths. Nearly every scholarly consideration of myth begins by declaring that there is no unified, universally accepted rubric that encompasses all myths. Although comparativist theorists, such as Joseph Campbell, have searched for overarching thematic commonalities across cultures, and structuralist theorists, notably Claude Lévi-Strauss, have sought consistent narrative patterns, there is wide variation in views about the existence of universal mythic norms. Nonetheless, there are a few generally accepted approaches to considering the functions and attributes of myths across cultures and across millennia.

One point of consistency has to do with the fundamental truths that myths contain for a given culture. At their most basic, myths are shared beliefs conveyed in the form of narrative and endowed with cultural authority and validity. In common parlance, a myth is taken to be something that is unbelievable and substantially untrue. Whereas the Greek *logos* refers to language rooted in reason, *mythos* refers to the articulation of the imaginative and the non-rational. But from the perspectives of cultural anthropology and comparative religion, myths are assumed by their hearers to contain essential, often sacred, truths about their experience. Although mythic narratives may seem fantastical, these stories' underlying values have deep validity for those who perceive and perpetuate them. Robert Segal, who has written widely about the history and theory of myth, defines myths, at their most basic, as ritually repeated stories that derive their power and place in a culture through repetition, variation, and adaptability. He insists that for a cultural narrative to qualify as a myth, it needs to be consistently and tenaciously believed by its adherents, even when it seems to contradict lived experience. With myths, Segal explains, 'The conviction remains firm even in the face of its transparent falsity.' Because they are intrinsic to social values, their truth is taken for granted and sanctified by the culture that cherishes them. They are distinguished from legends, folk tales, and historical accounts because, beyond simply telling an engaging, familiar story, they 'accomplish [...] something significant for their adherents.'⁷

That 'something significant' is a cultural consensus about how the world can be made intelligible and morally lucid. When science and rationality reach their limits in explaining natural or social phenomena, myths reassure their hearers that those phenomena are coherent and are containable within a narrative discourse. In ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski's succinct formation:

Myth fulfills [...] an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient in human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.⁸

Malinowski's functional view suggests that myths provide a reassuring narrative framework for understanding a culture's beliefs about how the world works and how individual members of that culture are expected to

proceed through that world. They sanction a particular, comprehensible explanation for why things are the way they are.

As such, myths contain an aura of inevitability: what religion scholars Wendy Doniger and Laurie Patton call 'an "always-already given" quality.'⁹ Mythic narratives tend to naturalize particular ways of interpreting experience, so that we hold these myths to be self-evident and we barely notice their lingering presence in our cultural discourse. It is this ostensibly timeless, ineluctable aspect of mythic narratives that endows them with such cultural status and resonance. As they mediate our world views, social arrangements, and moral judgments, their contingent qualities go undetected. So stories that are, in actuality, highly inflected with historical, cultural, and ideological assumptions camouflage those assumptions to present a cultural logic that seems incontrovertible. In *The Myth of the State*, his study of the intersection of mythic thinking and political theory, Ernst Cassirer claims that mythic thinking has its own brand of emotion-laden logic: 'A myth is in a sense invulnerable. It is impervious to rational arguments; it cannot be refuted by syllogisms.'¹⁰ He echoes Malinowski in claiming that the 'truth' of myths derives from an emotional attachment to their cosmological outlook. Both theorists have a pragmatic view of myth: to promote harmony and cohesion among cultural constituents who share a deeply emotional response to mythic lore.

Cassirer endows myth with both a psychological and a sociological function. Psychologically, myths fulfill their hearers' needs by providing a reassuring and emotionally satisfying explanation for how things are. Sociologically, they provide a sense of solidarity and affinity for those who absorb and repeat these stories.¹¹ Such a functional view of mythic narratives suggests that they exist to validate social behaviors and structures, and to supply a clarifying lens through which a culture might communally gaze on its lived experience. Doniger has come up with an apt description of that mythic lens with her metaphor of the microscope and the telescope. In her formulation, myths provide a sort of double vision, focusing simultaneously on the close-up details of individual human lives and the panoramic view of cosmic matters:

The myth offers a fictive solution to the problem that it raises, but we may carry it back into our lives to make it real.... Myths form a bridge between the terrifying abyss of cosmological ignorance and our comfortable familiarity with our recurrent, if tormenting, human problems. Myths make us reverse the focus, viewing through the telescope of detachment the personal lives that we normally view

through the microscope and viewing the cosmic questions through the microscope of intimate involvement.¹²

So the double lens of myth allows us to perceive, with seeming facility, stories that resonate with personal, communal, and ontological concerns.

Doniger goes on to claim that myths, however deeply encoded and ritually invoked, have no fixity of meaning. Instead they are conventional stories that are capable of being understood and interpreted in any number of ways:

A myth is a much-retold narrative that is transparent to a variety of constructions of meaning, a neutral structure that allows paradoxical meanings to be held in a charged tension. This transparency – the quality of a lens – allows a myth, more than other forms of narrative, to be shared by a group (who, as individuals, have various points of view) and to survive through time (through different generations with different points of view). The transparency of myth has at least three significant effects: (1) any single telling may incorporate various voices; (2) any myth may generate different retellings, different variants, each with its own voice; and (3) any single telling is subject to various reinterpretations.¹³

Myths endure in a culture precisely because they are able to evolve and adapt to varying circumstances. The basic narrative attributes and cultural ideals remain stable, or at least recognizable, but the meaning derived from those attributes is variable. This is the paradox of mythic narrative: both the familiarity of the stories and their interpretive suppleness are essential to their endurance. Myths, while inflected with social values and meanings, are also organically responsive to social changes. Indeed, they function to mediate those changes as they provide a template for confronting new challenges with old ideals. Particularly for contemporary myths, which appear and reappear in a variety of permutations and representational forms, the interplay between familiar narrative contours and fresh contexts allows for a dynamic tension.

Myth and ideology

Latter-day myths generally function to explain social, rather than physical, phenomena. They are cosmogonies in the sense that they address the culturally inscribed origins of human tendencies and aspirations,

rather than the origins of the universe. So instead of helping us to comprehend the mysteries of nature, contemporary myths try to comprehend the workings of human nature. Our mythic stories tend to resonate experientially and ideologically, if not literally; although we may not give absolute credence to the actual events of the narrative in the way that hearers of sacred myths did, we nonetheless subscribe to the normative values and world views contained in that narrative.

The root assumptions of contemporary myths have a fundamental ideological validity that taps into a culture's self-image and that is sustained through changing social and historical circumstances.¹⁴ The intersection of cultural myths and national ideologies is the starting point for many considerations of how current myths function and what needs they fulfill. These works have informed my analysis of the American success myth, and my own sense of the extent to which the forms and functions of sacred, pre-modern myths are pertinent to secular cultural narratives in modern times.¹⁵ By transposing classic myth theory to contemporary iterations of myth, these works suggest that the site where myth, social history, and national ideology intersect is fertile ground for mapping the transcendent ideas of American culture. But it is also contested terrain where denotative signposts point in multiple directions. Hence, these cultural artifacts need to be unearthed and examined for the varied meanings they may reveal. Among those cultural artifacts, myths are, by definition, so familiar that the process of analyzing them requires a critical estrangement from formal and thematic norms and a deliberate, evidential excavation of the ideologies contained within them.

In his work on political myths, Christopher G. Flood defines contemporary myth as 'ideology cast in the form of story,' and claims that the delights of narrative help to naturalize and legitimize prevailing ideological assumptions so that they seem inevitable and universally applicable. According to him:

The narrative discourse carries the imprint of the assumptions, values, and goals associated with a specific ideology or identifiable family of ideologies, and it therefore conveys an explicit or implicit invitation to assent to a particular ideological standpoint.... To be the expression of a *myth* the telling of a given narrative in any particular instance needs to be perceived as being adequately faithful to the most important facts *and* the correct interpretation of a story which a social group already accepts or subsequently comes to accept as true.¹⁶

In a sense, myths provide good cover for embedded dogma, since their persistently recycled narrative conventions seem to be 'the once-and-forever-known repository of exemplary models.'¹⁷ Both myths and their values-laden assumptions are so much a part of a culture's collective DNA that they seem to be an element of nature rather than of culture. The ideological givens of the American success myth – the credo of individualism, the assumption of universal opportunity for advancement and self-improvement, the unified idea about what success entails – come to us via a set of thematic and formal conventions that are instantly recognizable and seemingly incontestable. They are so deeply implanted in the national mind that we tend to accept them uncritically and forget their status as cultural constructions. So the task of reading contemporary myths involves ferreting out and deciphering how entrenched ideologies are presented, reinforced, and, sometimes, challenged in multiple tellings of the myth.

American myths and contemporary cultural narratives

Two decades ago, film scholar Robert Ray demonstrated one method of employing myth theory to illuminate – and complicate – the ideologies embedded in contemporary cultural narratives in his book *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980*. His analysis of five decades of Hollywood movies was among a few works of film hermeneutics to proceed from Claude Lévi-Strauss' theory of binary oppositions.¹⁸ In arguing that myths across cultures display an 'astounding similarity' and are subject to certain universal structural principles, Lévi-Strauss had identified several antinomies that recur in mythic narratives.¹⁹ In his comparative structural analysis, all myths contain sets of paired forces that pull against one other, as well as forces that then try to mediate or resolve this apparent incompatibility. According to this theory, myth's function in, and appeal to, a given culture involves its attempt to reconcile such oppositions: to imply that both can be accommodated and that their discrepancies can be negotiated or overcome.

Ray's systematic study of American films exposes our own mythology's recurring oppositions: adventure/domesticity, individual/community, and worldly success/ordinary life. The thematic paradigm that he identifies seems to confirm Lévi-Strauss' claim of a reconciliatory pattern in mythic narratives, as these movies repeatedly deny the necessity for choosing between such contradictory desires. Ray suggests that American movies insist on a 'both/and' rather than an 'either/or' ethic. Our cultural narratives adamantly split the difference between

competing commitments by suggesting that, as Americans, we can gratify conflicting desires and can thereby avoid irrevocable decisions that exclude other possibilities. This denial of the need to make difficult choices, and the concomitant belief that we can have it all, is, Ray claims, one of the hallmarks of American exceptionalism, which optimistically endorses the notion that we are unbound by limits and exempt from the burdens of history that beset other nations.²⁰ Lévi-Strauss' theory of binary oppositions is the jumping-off point for Ray's exploration of the ideological implications of these wish-fulfilling resolutions of dialectical forces that appear repeatedly in success myth narratives.

One of the foundational works on American mythology is historian Richard Slotkin's monumental trilogy on the myth of the American frontier.²¹ Slotkin echoes anthropological definitions of myths as symbolic formulations which transmit a culture's values and world view from one generation to the next. They do so by renewing their basic narrative qualities but also by adapting them to changing social and historical circumstances.²² Since myth traffics in well-established beliefs and calls forth predetermined, almost ritualized, responses, it provides a shorthand way of interpreting our material conditions and our lived existence. So we intuitively recognize a myth's contours even when it appears in new forms or eras.

Like Ray, Slotkin sees mythic values as simultaneously appealing and simplistic (or, more to the point, appealing because they are simplistic). 'The moral and political imperatives implicit in the myths are given as if they were the only possible choices for moral and intelligent beings; and, similarly, the set of choices confronted are limited to a few traditional "either/or" decisions.'²³ The stark symbolic dualities that define the frontier myth (east/west, civilization/nature, cowboy/Indian, rancher/homesteader, settler/nomad) or the success myth (material/spiritual success, worldliness/ordinariness, fame/anonymity, ambition/acquiescence, self-interest/civic duty) contain moral valuations that consistently privilege one alternative of each pair over the other. Slotkin labels such mythic discourses as 'a constraining grammar of codified memories and beliefs' that affect both our outlook and our behaviors by enlisting us in their comfortingly oversimplified program.²⁴ He further claims that once the formal qualities of myth are 'reduced to a set of powerfully evocative and resonant "icons" ... [they] become part of the language, as a deeply encoded set of metaphors that may contain all of the "lessons" we have learned from our history, and all of the essential elements of our world view.'²⁵

Slotkin's wide-ranging, broadly diachronic study posits myth as a buffer against the changes wrought by history. As he examines the mythology of the frontier from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries across discursive forms (literary, political, performative, and cinematic), he demonstrates the ways in which cultural myths condition us to interpret and respond to historical change. Mythic narratives and their attendant ideologies function as cultural ballast, providing stability and assurance as we navigate the upheavals of history. They also stand as a denial of temporality:

Myth has a paradoxical way of dealing with historical experience: although the materials of myth are historical, myth organizes these materials ahistorically. . . . What is lost when history is translated into myth is the essential premise of history – the distinction of past and present itself. The past is made metaphorically equivalent to the present; and the present appears simply as a repetition of persistently recurring structures identified with the past. Both past and present are reduced to instances displaying a single 'law' or principle of nature, which is seen as timeless in its relevance, and as transcending all historical contingencies.²⁶

The familiarity of mythic beliefs encourages us to view them as eternal verities that provide a ready frame for understanding what is happening to and around us. In this way, mythic narrative functions transhistorically, not only creating national comity but also eliding past and present so that our communal experience is purportedly 'readable' by a few, multipurpose mythic lenses. This idea that myth provides one of our dominant interpretive tools is a large and highly fraught claim. But Slotkin painstakingly demonstrates how, across 400 years of American history, the frontier myth has served as a broadly applied metaphor, used in our public discourse to rationalize and justify everything from America's expansionist policies to our political choices to our role in global affairs. His demonstration of the reciprocity between myth and social history and the ways in which the frontier myth has been subtly responsive to changing social, political, and economic circumstances is applicable to the success myth as well.

Slotkin recognizes the success myth as a variant of the frontier myth in that both associate self-invention with the consolidation of a national identity. Early in our history the frontier myth's protagonist established himself as the embodiment of autonomous individualism by doing battle with hostile elements to make the country safe for civilization. He