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From (French) Automobile to (Beninois) Agbo: Mythology, Modernity and *Divine Carcasse*

What happens to mythology, both theoretically and practically, when it circulates from large European cities to African villages? How does European mythology change when confronted with an unfamiliar landscape? How do cultural markers (continue to) signify meaning in foreign situations? The 1998 film *Divine Carcasse*¹ by Dominique Loreau follows a car as it moves from Cotonou (Benin), to the outskirts of Cotonou, and on to the village of Ouassou, changing from being a mode of private transportation to a taxicab to the statue of an ancestral divinity. Through examining issues of mythology, commodities, fetishes, language and the “afterlife,” present in the works of major European critics of modernity and mythology as well as in this particular film, I examine how mythologies are forced to modify themselves. Critical changes and questions concerning the practice of mythology both in Europe and in Africa interweave among major problems concerning the complexities of urban and non-urban myth.

I put the work of Louis Aragon, Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes into dialogue with the film, *Divine Carcasse*. An in-depth reading of mythology in Benjamin

taxi and attempts to earn money from his new possession. After troubles of his own with the car, Joseph returns to his employment at Simon's and explains to him that he was absent from work since he went to a fetishist who told him to make peace with an ancestor, a maternal uncle who was angry with him. Joseph abandons the car at a mechanic's garage. It is put up on blocks and scavenged—tyres are removed, car doors, the hood, engine parts, etc. Eventually, it becomes evident to the viewer that the car is being used for parts in order to create something entirely different; the car takes shape into an ancestor statue. The sculptor of the statue meets with four men who have commissioned the statue to be a representation of the divinity Agbo. The statue is then

imagery and illusion he encounters in his everyday life, his modern mythology.

Modernity in this understanding requires and creates its own mythology.

However, modernity also is explicitly invested in the idea of exposing mythology as false. Immanuel Kant, the paradigmatic figure of modernism, writes that he wants all

they are a prime example of the old mixing with the new. Benjamin writes, “each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives towards the moment of waking.”⁷ Thus, this dreaming and this goal of waking are linked to history as a process that continually happens and can be a connection between different epochs.

On a different level, this fetishizing happens in Benin, a centre for voodoo worship that relies extensively upon fetishes in religious practice. *The Historical Dictionary of Benin* defines voodoo as

Various ancestral and spirit cults, deities and fetishes encompassing cosmological beliefs and myths.... In 1993 it was estimated that 62 percent of Beninois practice vodun, and during February 8-18 of that year the First International Festival of Vodun Art and Culture took place in Ouidah..., opened by President Nicéphore Sobo....⁸

Creating a fetish out of a commodity resonates doubly within Beninois culture. The idea of voodoo as a concept that incorporates spirituality and everyday life in Benin, the setting of the film, brings the fetish out of the theoretical plane and into the practice of everyday life.

Waking and the Afterlife

As Benjamin sought to push society toward wakefulness and therefore out of mythology, Loreau, the filmmaker, seems to desire the same thing. Soon after the film begins, Simon, the first owner of the car, prepares a lesson about Plato’s cave allegory. He is depicted working while a voice-over reads aloud what he writes. The voice states:

Leçon de 5 fevrier:
Platon divise le monde en 2. Le monde des senses: tout est ephemère. Le monde des idées éternels. Connaissance est du monde des idées. Il faut imaginer les hommes, prisonniers au fond du caverne, assis le dos à lumière, condamnés à ne voir que le mur devant eux.⁹

Using Plato's conception that knowledge is obscured can easily mirror what Benjamin proposes in terms of how mythology covers over objects. Benjamin wants people to rouse themselves awake and become aware of mythology much in the same way that Plato uses the cave allegory to show how people understand ideas as they are presented to them. Plato's cave allegory deals with images and how what is behind imagery must be sought in order to understand reality clearly. Loreau's use of Plato's cave allegory alludes to the existence of a filter between the imagery and reality, where perception and mythology can be read into the example.

One route that Benjamin proposes as a way in which to break free of mythology and the dream world is through the examination of the "afterlife" of a commodity. The "afterlife" is what occurs once a commodity has become outdated. Graeme Gilloch offers a definition of this stage claiming:

Benjamin's "afterlife" of the commodity is vital to keep in mind while studying this film. The afterlife is what happens to the Peugeot once it has been taken out of its context. In this film, it is quite literally demolished—stripped and taken apart—and this process shows the removal of contextualisation. The car can no longer be seen in the same way; its function is entirely different. The Peugeot has been transformed into a divinity statue. Loreau depicts another passage over water, symbolically showing the beginning of another new life, as was meant in the opening shots when the car came across the ocean from France. Once the car is taken out of its environment, according to Benjamin it has been removed from its mythology and its true value is visible. Its "true" (à la Benjamin) value, then, would be as a participant in the mythology of the village, in the form of the god Agbo because the mythology surrounding the car has been disenchanting. The car severs itself from the history that it was attached to, a history of commodification and capitalism, and becomes linked to a different history altogether. No longer a form of physical transportation, it perhaps creates a spiritual transport for those who believe in the divinity Agbo. Interestingly, this transformation and transplanting of histories shows that nothing can actually escape the ties of history. A new history would seem always to supplant the old.

The car works in a variety of ways with Benjamin's conception of mythology and the afterlife. Fetishizing and removing a commodity from its context are profitable and the film aptly illustrates those ideas. However, mythology is never disenchanting in the film. Rather, more specifically, as one mythology is disenchanting, another is proposed. Myth is never denied. Thus, on a basic level, some of Benjamin's ideas about mythology

What does mythology need? First, it needs a person on whom to work. Barthes
claims

conscience qu'elle provoque), mais déjà banale, il suffirait de peu pour qu'elle devienne insignifiante (il n'y a aucune mythologie du réfrigérateur en Amérique). Comme ce n'est pas encore le cas, il reste dans l'automobile française des traces mythique...¹⁶

B: We can't call it that. Here we have our own ancestors who protect and guide us. It can't be our protecting god. It's nothing but an old car.... You can't call a living object an ancestor.

There is an interesting play with the word *ancêtre* in this conversation. This mythology of the word "ancestor" and/or genealogy is rejected by the Beninois. Joseph presents the idea of the slang term with amazement and humour, but the villager is actively opposed to such an interpretation and concludes that this mythology will not work within his specific culture. Critically, cultural specificity is a barrier to mythology's understanding. What works as mythology in France does not work in Benin. Even within the same language, linguistic, slang differences highlight how much cultures participate in their own mythopoesis and how a myth produced can only work within that particular society.

Further, Barthes claims in *Mythologies* that myth "transform[e] un sens en forme."¹⁸ Change from a sense (as conveyed by a word) into a form is precisely the journey that the Peugeot follows over the course of the film. The car travels from having the sense of an ancestor to actually being an ancestor. In this way, the car would seem to be fully participating in mythology and taking on mythological characteristics. However, I must emphasise that Barthes did not necessarily foresee in this passage such a change as the one that the car travels. The two mythologies of bourgeois capitalism and the African village are not the same and should not be layered on top of each other as the same. But, despite these differences, through this transformation, the car leaves behind the cultural specificities of language and history. Instead of being linked to language, which is always-already related to a particular culture, the car becomes a thing, seemingly recognisable as such in every culture. However, the ways in which French and Beninois culture regard the car transmuted into divinity are still very different. Although this

metamorphosis passes from language into form, cultural ties are still present and demand an understanding of that form.

So, what conclusions for the film can be drawn after reading it in terms of Barthes's idea of mythology? *Divine Carcasse* demonstrates one way Barthes' transformation of sense into form can take place through the car's evolution from automobile to Agbo. The film also shows how language can be associated with history in the scene between Joseph and the Beninois who rejects the term "ancestor" for a car. That particular short scene deftly illustrates how language can have its sense changed by time and culture.

I assert that it is no coincidence that it is a car that can showcase this ability of transformation. As Barthes wrote in "La Voiture: projection de l'ego," "ce n'est plus bientôt, peut-être, une mythologie de l'automobile qu'il faudra écrire: c'est une mythologie de la conduite."¹⁹ The ability to travel, to move physically and in terms of shape, enables the transformation of this commodity to take place. If the mythology of the automobile is really a mythology of movement as Barthes suggests, this movement is what occurs in the film. It is not that the automobile changes, as much as its modes of communication, travel and development change.

From the generalised cityscape to the particularised village

Despite the fact that this film seems to work more or less with Benjamin and Barthes's conceptions of mythology, I am left with some critical questions to ask. Benjamin and Barthes wrote in Europe, exploring the mythology of the city, a "new" mythology that they believed somehow came about because of the particular everyday life there. Their

understandings of myth emerge from the urban context—from examining the arcades for

This importance of culture in modernity can then allow for African culture to be brought into the dialogue. Kwame Gyekye writes in *Tradition and Modernity:*

Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience:

The alleged spirituality of the African world—which in the traditional setting is in many ways allowed to impede sustained inquiries into the world of nature—will have to come to terms with materiality, that is, with the physical world of science.²⁰

The culture of Africa will have an effect on modernity; the interface of spirituality (the African characteristic) with materiality (the European value) will eventually have to be negotiated.

Does this film embody one way of exploring this negotiation? Does *Divine Carcasse* imagine the coming to terms of materiality with spirituality in the African context? I think that this is one attractive way in which to read the film. However, the fact that the spiritual wins out so clearly against the material is troubling. I do not think that Gyekye would posit that one pole of that dichotomy would have to eliminate the other. A song that the villagers sing in order to accept Agbo seems to erase the materiality of the automobile and entirely supplant it with a spiritual mythology. Even though I think that this film shows the beginning stages

for the interests of others, to be replaced by the pursuit of individual and

more closely linked to spirituality and to popular beliefs. Simon finds a fetish in his car and accuses Joseph of putting it there. Joseph goes to a *feticheur* who tells him that he needs to mend his relationship with his deceased, maternal uncle. The fetish is not a metaphor in this culture, but instead something closely linked to everyday life.

Differences in cultural understanding are reflected in (French) Automobile to (Beninois) Agbo 194

competing urge for the novel as espoused by modernity force the theorists out of the urban.

If the urban is no longer new, and every urban space is growing to be the same, what other option is there in the search for new territory other than the non-urban? This desperation may be, then, why the village becomes such an important site in *Divine Carcasse*. Forced out of the city in its quest for novelty and its quest for new territory, modernity heads for the specifically non-urban, hoping to recover the identity that the Generic City has stripped away.

The search for novelty does indeed lead out of the urban and into the village, as demonstrated in *Divine Carcasse*, but what does that mean for myth? Does this change force myth back into nature if indeed it is pushed out of the more modern urban setting? I think that it would be short-sighted to claim that this film brings mythology from the modern urban site back to a nature-related village mythology. Mythology as portrayed in this film fully participates in both the urban and the non-urban. It is clearly and definitively tied to Barthes' conception of language and Benjamin's understanding of the "afterlife" even when (especially when) Agbo is paraded through the streets of the village. The modern conceptions of mythology are not left behind, only modified at the same time as the transmutation of the car. When presented with the particularity of the African village, European modern mythology must change somehow. The solution that *Divine Carcasse* suggests is a blending of European and African mythologies in a complex, debatable, sometimes uneasy, combination that parades a French automobile down a village pathway in the form of Agbo.

¹¹ Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Barthes, Roland,” in Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, eds., *The Johns*