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Necessary Myths

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Necessary Myths

The word religion comes from the latin verb religare, which means to 're-bind'. I believe that is the core role religion plays, it binds meaning to life. The tool that does the binding, and the concept which inspired my essay, is belief. This quote by David Foster Wallace¹ describes the role belief can play in both giving and stripping meaning from our lives:

“Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship ... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already—it's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.”²

Necessary Myths is a visual essay that explores the role belief, both its presence and absence, has played in representational painting, myth and philosophy. I investigate the history of representational images and their relationship to religion, and the role they play and or might play in today's landscape of social media, capitalism and climate change. When I first began thinking about belief I picked up and re-read one of my favorite books, “The Power of Myth” (1988) by Joseph Campbell. Campbell distills mythology down to its essence, a story which gives our lives meaning. In reading Campbell I realized just how impactful belief can be in creating meaning. Campbell suggests that myths were created to help us reconcile ourselves to the most brutal realities of human existence. Those first creation myths helped us come to an understanding with the life and death cycle, which Campbell describes as “the brutal precondition of all life, which lives by the killing and eating of lives. So the essence of life is this eating of itself! Life lives on lives”³. This essence, as Campbell describes it, is the cycle of life and death. One animal is hunted and dies so another can eat and live.

¹ David Foster Wallace was an American author and professor, best known for his book Infinite Jest.

² Wallace, David F. 2009. *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. N.p.: Little, Brown.

³ Flowers, Betty S., Joseph Campbell, and Bill D. Moyers. 1988. *The Power of Myth*. Edited by Betty S. Flowers. N.p.: Doubleday.

The ouroboros, a snake which devours its own tail, is a monomythic⁴ symbol commonly used to represent this life cycle. Early creation myths honoring this cycle took the shape of violent rituals. These rituals, often in the form of animal or human sacrifice, emulated the life cycle and created a way to accept it.

The Indonesian Maros-Pangkep karst cave paintings (est. 43,900 years old) are the oldest known works of figurative art in the world. These paintings tell the story of part human, part animal figures hunting a herd of large mammals. I interpret these hunting paintings as being part of the creation myth ritual. Hunting is the killing/sacrifice, and the art honors and memorializes the hunted, gives them new life and continues the life and death cycle. The creation of these paintings is part of the ritual, honoring the cycle of life and death, and hunter and hunted as flip sides of the same coin. Perhaps the depiction of the hunters as part animal themselves was intended to acknowledge the inextricable link and endless cycle between hunter and hunted.

In many early religions, after a hunt the killed animal would be venerated in some way.⁵ They likely held the belief that the animal's soul would only return to our living world to begin the life/death cycle anew if its sacrifice was honored properly. They were keenly aware that without the animals' sacrifice the hunters would starve. This death, burial, and resurrection cycle would become the monomythic core of almost all religions, and in this sense these representational paintings could be considered the first gasp of religious ritual.

Or maybe I am assigning these images too much power, or as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, surplus value. Mitchell suggests that images, much like Campbell's life-death cycle, are self-negating. To see an image is to have its content given to us and taken away simultaneously. The power is mostly not in the image itself, but the thirst it creates in us. Thirst is created by the image in supplying the viewer with a concept of something, but not the physical thing which it depicts. This gap of assigned importance between image and thirst is bridged by "good taste". Not just anything can sate this thirst, as Mitchell describes in criticism's role in assigning value:

"Separation of true from false, baneful from beneficent, ugly from beautiful, seems like one of the fundamental tasks of criticism. Insofar as the very word criticism implies a separation of good from bad, the problem of images seems immediately to settle on evaluation, and even more urgently, on a "crisis" of value that makes true

⁴ A monomyth is a myth which was invented in multiple cultures, seemingly independent of any influence on each other.

⁵ Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, xvi.

criticism seem almost by default to present itself as a kind of iconoclasm, an effort to destroy or expose the false images that bedevil us”⁶.

Gilles Deleuze frames the pursuit of philosophy as the platonic separation of the false image from the true one, and suggests that through Plato’s interpretation all philosophy is a kind of iconoclasm. The Oxford English Dictionary includes two definitions for Iconoclasm. The first, “The action of attacking or assertively rejecting cherished beliefs and institutions or established values and practices”, speaks to the overarching purpose of iconoclasm, to do away with a rejected belief system. The second, “The rejection or destruction of religious images as heretical; the doctrine of iconoclasts”⁷, speaks to the method, which is to achieve this goal through the destruction of images. In iconoclasm the power of images is estimated very highly, to destroy the image is to destroy the religion and all its gods. The goal then of an iconoclast is to destroy the image by destroying all of the material depictions of it, the pictures. Plato’s allegory of the cave portrays the concrete world of objects as a false, or incomplete reflection of the “true” world which cannot exist or be perceived in concrete form.

Mitchell extends this allegory to images and pictures. In their most hyper-valued appreciation images embody the true world while the pictures that depict them are relegated to the fallible and incomplete physical world. This is the hyper-valued interpretation of images, but Mitchell’s preferred interpretation places the critic in the position of a natural historian, and images and pictures as species and specimens. This interpretation aids in dismantling the potential surplus value assigned to images, reframing their value from good and bad, or true and false, into degrees of evolutionary success. From a framework of evolutionary success, images are valued by their capacity to endure and replicate, rather than a moral or aesthetic value structure.

Considering images as animals brings us back to those first Sulawesi cave paintings depicting animals and animal human hybrids. This birth place of religious belief was a marriage of the life and death cycle of the natural world to images. To create the image of these animals was to give them life again after killing them. These paintings can also then be attributed with the first known existence of another creation myth theme, to create life which goes on ahead of you. It is seen in Christianity, through God’s creation of Adam and Eve, but restriction of their knowledge. We also see it in the Greek myth of the god Prometheus, in which Prometheus is punished by the other god’s for giving fire to the humans. Restricting fire, or knowledge, symbolize

⁶ Mitchell, *The Surplus Value of Images*, p.3

⁷ Weiner, Edmund, and John Simpson, eds. 2002. *The Oxford English Dictionary*

the terror the creator feels at the power his creation might come to have. Iconoclasm is a response to the terror of images as living things, which once created can no longer be under our control. Images and religion were born together, and are in many ways one and the same. Like the two definitions of iconoclasm, holy wars are waged in the name of religion, but their method in doing so is to destroy the “false” pictures.

Do images, like religion, have to be believed (or hyper valued) to survive? And are there forms of hyper valuation that might serve the evolution of images, and the religions which bow to them, better than others? Mitchell distills the types of overvaluation into three distinct terms; idolatry, fetishism, and totemism. Idolatry is positioned as having the greatest degree of hypervalue, it is an image of a god. Fetishism is positioned as a false idol, all the power of the fetish is in the object itself, a perverse commodity. Totemism, the last and oldest form of image hyper valuation, was an object of worship that represented the community instead of a separate, higher being. The earliest forms of religion/images were totems. They are often characterized by scenes of animals and nature, but most importantly, they do not impose a hierarchy.

Like the closely associated and nebulous concepts of naturalism and animism, they embrace the life and death cycle rather than trying to escape it. "The term totemism covers relations, posed ideologically, between two series, one natural, the other cultural."⁸ . My interpretation of totemism is that, like the earliest ritual expressions of religion, it attempts a reconciliation of man/society with the natural world. Totemism, and the early mythologies which it plays such a powerful role within, held nature as divinity. Not a hierarchy based divinity, but a communal one. Man-as-nature-as-divinity. Joseph Campbell's account of a pygmy legend showcases this belief system:

“I think of the pygmy legend of the little boy who finds the bird with a beautiful song and brings it home. He asks his father to bring food for the bird, and the father doesn't want to feed a mere bird, so he kills it. And the legend says the man killed the bird, and with the bird he killed the song, and with the song, himself. He dropped dead, completely dead, and was dead forever”⁹. (Flowers, Campbell, and Moyers 1988, p. 21).

Campbell's story references death's cyclical, rather than impermanent, role in the life-death-resurrection cycle. It suggests that the only way to achieve a permanent death is through rejecting our role in the natural world, by placing ourselves above or separate from nature. Early nature-based religions which favored totemism, like the one in Campbell's story, rarely featured “high gods”, beings of elevated status who watched

⁸ Mitchell, *The Surplus Value of Images*, p.17

⁹ Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p.21

and judged us.¹⁰ Idols and fetishes, and the religious beliefs they have most often served, seem to hold an opposing belief. The Idol-worshippers goal, as I interpret it, is to escape the natural world order. The idol creates a hierarchy of dominion, god above man above animal/nature. The fetish creates a similar hierarchy, the dominion of the individual fueled through material accumulation. Both grew legs, or maybe even wings, and outpaced totemism. The idol, and the hierarchical religions which accompany it, has been the most powerful of the three by far. These “high god” religions overtook nature-based ones early in the course of human history, and became perhaps the single most influential belief system in the shaping of human history. Religious dominion in the name of one higher god has shaped history through imperialism, colonialism, manifest destiny, more ways than I can begin to name.

Religion and belief have lost some of that power in contemporary America. Younger generations are increasingly less religious than previous generations¹¹. But the full impact of the power religious dominion held is only just beginning to show. The belief systems that took us out of nature and placed us above it fueled climate change as surely as oil and natural gas did. Climate scientists have known what the trajectory we are on would lead to for decades. But for myself and I think many Americans, it took a global pandemic to truly begin to understand that living in a developed country would not insulate us from disaster. The first wave of extreme weather events struck alongside this realization, and brought with it a broadspread anxiety and grief that has been coined “doomerism”¹². We have never had less belief, and we have never needed it more. While religious belief has waned, images, particularly the long-legged idol and fetish, have remained alive and well. Capitalism, mass and social media, and technology enabled new reproductive capacities which have led to an evolutionary leap for images. Isolated and constrained indoors during the pandemic, it felt like all we did was look at images, create fetishes and idols of them, and thirst. The emotional weight of this isolated image inundation is captured in Bo Burnham comedy special “Inside”¹³, released during the lockdown.

Sandwiched in the middle of his set of comedy songs is a quiet, folky song called “That Funny Feeling” which expresses the sense of impending doom that is sublimated in our online existences perfectly. Burnham lists off a long litany of contradictory concepts “Stunning 8k resolution meditation app” and “in honor of the revolution it’s half off at the Gap” to introduce the feeling which seems so hard to describe. It is a song

¹⁰ “Hunter-Gatherers and the Origins of Religion.” 2016. NCBI.

¹¹ Masci, David. 2016. “Q&A: Why Millennials are less religious than older Americans.” Pew Research Center.

¹² Buckley, Cara. 2022. “‘OK Doomer’ and the Climate Advocates Who Say It’s Not Too Late.” The New York Times.

¹³ “That Funny Feeling -- Bo Burnham (from "Inside").” 2021. YouTube.

about capitalism, social media and his fears about the commodification of social life. Threaded throughout Burnham also describes his more fatalistic fears surrounding incoming climate change: “The whole world at your fingertips, the ocean at your door, twenty-thousand years of this, seven more to go”. The song fades out with this chorus line:

“Hey, what can you say?
We were overdue
But it'll be over soon
You wait”

“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”¹⁴
(Flowers, Campbell, and Moyers 1988, 3).

My thesis was conceived as a search for belief that could transform the despair of what has been lost, into valuing what we still have. I wanted to find a way to reconcile myself with the world and its life-death cycle, and I decided to try to do it the same way the ancient people in the Sulawesi caves did: by telling a story through representational painting. I chose to paint a triptych depicting the course of a feast. My feast is depicted in three stages; from carefully laid out, brutally torn apart, to decomposing. These three paintings are positioned in a pyramid, encircled by a yellow ribbon which guides the viewer to read the triptych as a cycle. The yellow ribbon winds between the pieces, tying into a bow above the final painting, and ending with the tail of the ribbon overlapping with the beginning. The yellow ribbon symbolizes both an ouroboros and a snake with wings, representing the marriage of the earthly/physical and heavenly/psychological worlds. I reference several other cycles and trios in my thesis, most obviously the life-death-resurrection cycle. I intended each of the three paintings to represent one of the categories of images; idol, fetish and totem. My final and most personal intention in using this cyclical symbolism was as an expression of my own journey towards what Campbell describes as “an experience of being alive”. My experience of that particular

¹⁴ Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 3

funny feeling is that it is a life-death cycle as well, something that can only be experienced acutely at times because of its absence at others.

My thesis is constrained to visual symbolism to impart meaning to its viewer. I know the meaning my triptych holds for me, and I hope I have laid out a clear enough road map to make that meaning discernible to the careful viewer. But I also chose the symbolic language of the still life to allow the viewer to find their own meaning. My intent was to express my desire to shift away from hypervaluing idols/fetishes and belief systems of dominion towards a more totemic hypervaluation of community and the natural world. A shift occurs between the idol, fetish and totem paintings. With each painting the subjects are pulled closer to the viewer, drawn from darkness into light. Tight, carefully representational rendering gives way to looser, subjective strokes.

My first piece, referred to as “Idol”, is carefully rendered. I attempted the trompe l'oeil style, and emulated the still life tradition seen in Netherland renaissance paintings. This painting is representative of idolatry, and the belief systems of hierarchy and dominion it represents. For my purposes in this piece, these are represented as false gods. The trompe l'oeil¹⁵ style this piece is rendered in is utilized here to bring into question the idea of objective truth and its relationship to belief. One of my philosophical and stylistic goals in this thesis is an abandonment of the illusion of the absolute/real to achieve the personal/subjective inherent to belief. In this painting I refer to Plato's allegory of the cave, in which the concrete, “real” world is the false world.

Referencing the still life tradition of the netherland renaissance painters is another nod to this painting's role in the abrahamic landscape of idolatry. One of this tradition's most popular tropes, memento mori, is shown in the most conspicuously contemporary object in the painting: a birthday cake adorned in brightly colored sprinkles and a single candle. Birthday cakes, simultaneously a celebration of life and a literal countdown to death, serve as an inescapable reminder that death is coming. In “Idol”, my cake symbolizes the climate catastrophe that awaits. A plume of smoke travels in a straight line up to the top of the canvas from the cake's single candle. Our tradition of birthday cakes, and making a wish, likely originate from a similar tradition in ancient greece. Round cakes, meant to symbolize the moon, would be topped with a single candle. Once lit, the smoke from the candle was believed to carry prayers up to the goddess of the moon. Images of hands, reaching and clasped in prayer, are shown throughout the piece.

¹⁵ French for “to deceive the eye”, Trompe l'oeil is an art style which attempts to depict its subjects with such realism it is difficult to differentiate between what is painted and what is not.

My feast is laid upon a blue fabric, which over the course of the feast transforms from tablecloth, to tidal wave, to calm waters. This piece of my narrative is intended to represent the great flood, a monomyth which sprung up independently in many cultures. The great flood is sent by a high god to wipe out humanity for their sins. Its most well known iteration in western culture is in the genesis story of Noah's Ark. A great flood felt like a fitting symbol of destruction, as for the first time in history the coming natural disasters are actually due to human action. A great flood also represents my desire for nature based systems of belief to overtake ones of dominion. In my second piece, "Fetish", the tablecloth is in wave form, just beginning to crest over the aftermath of the feast's destruction. Beneath the wave, the feast has been violently dismantled, but not consumed. Scenes of fetishism are strewn throughout the painting. Phallic and boundary transgression imagery is shown in the knife stabbing through a crayfish and orange, binding them to each other and creating a new and unsettling object. The other subjects have been dismantled, the crawfish from whole beings into isolated body parts. Some focal subjects retain the tightly rendered style of "Idol", others take on the expressive, hazy quality which is seen throughout my final piece, "Totem".

"Totem", while still representational, abandons the constrained realism of "Idol". The lines between subjects are blurred, and the entire painting has a hazy, expressive quality. In "Totem", the aftermath of the violence is still apparent, but no longer abjectly horrifying. The destroyed feast is now decaying, returning to the earth and being consumed by new life, insects and amphibians which continue the life cycle. This piece is symbolic of resurrection, the end and beginning of the life cycle. I was inspired to render "Totem" in looser, more expressive brushstrokes by the impressionists. When photography came on the scene impressionist painters were thrown into an existential crisis, rendered obsolete in their position of recreating the illusion of the real. Instead, they began painting what they saw in the world. A moment in time, overlaid with the filter of their specific perception, their feeling, their emotion, their world. They had to abandon the search for creating the illusion of objective truth as photography did it better. Instead, they embraced the subjective. In my final piece I embrace the subjective as well, in an attempt to capture my emotional experience and journey to a belief and acceptance of the natural world order. My triptych suggests that while disaster and death awaits us, the life cycle will continue.

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