

Chapter 12

JOSÉ MANUEL LOSADA

Cultural Myth Criticism: Theory and Methodology

1 Introduction

For decades, literary critics have sought to imbue their research with a degree of empirical certainty akin to that achieved by linguistics. Likewise, myth criticism researchers have sought the endorsement of anthropology. In recent years, myth criticism researchers have leaned towards fashionable fields of study: gender studies, environmental studies, migration studies, and, in general, all those related to markedly political issues.

Of course, the myth criticism researcher must always integrate social and human disciplines, but without subordinating myth to them. They must also seek social and environmental justice, but without relegating myth to a secondary position. And never, under any circumstances, should they twist the text to make it say what they want it to say. Only when myth criticism overcomes its supposedly ancillary role and the tendency to pursue myths for tangential or dubious reasons will it evolve into a fully matured science.

In response to sociological conditions, a new methodological proposal – which I term Cultural Myth Criticism – seeks to provide a robust definition of myth and evaluate how contemporary factors influence it, thereby pinpointing its key functions. This innovative approach facilitates a thorough understanding of myth's complexity and its manifestations within the contemporary cultural framework.

Currently, there is no universally accepted definition of myth. Whilst there is consensus on the existence of ancient (e.g., Antigone), medieval (e.g., The Grail), and modern mythologies (e.g., Faust), agreement on what constitutes a myth remains elusive. The debate over the fundamental elements of myth – such as image, archetype, symbol, motif, theme, mytheme, character, figure, hero, and type – underscores this issue. Compounded by ambiguities, critical impressionism, and ideological biases, forging a consensus on the definition of myth seems almost utopian. Yet, the pursuit of such a definition is crucial and unavoidable.

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I offer a definition of myth that is the culmination of extensive research, collaborative efforts, and a deep engagement with numerous mythological narratives. This definition aims to solidify the theoretical base from which Cultural Myth Criticism can continue to evolve and impact the academic discourse on myths:

Myth is a narrative characterised by its functionality, symbolism, and thematic depth, recounting extraordinary events connected to transcendent, supernatural, and sacred references, typically devoid of direct historical documentation and always alluding to either an individual or a collective cosmogony or eschatology, yet always in an absolute sense.¹

This definition incorporates all the elements essential for the genesis of a myth, with a special emphasis on transcendence as the primary element influencing all others. It's important to clarify that I do not insist on researchers accepting the concept of transcendence uncritically, as that would be inappropriate and contrary to my role as a scholar. Instead, I assert that understanding mythological transcendence – its meaning and its manifestations in mythological narratives – is crucial for any thorough analysis of myths. Without sacred, supernatural transcendence, a narrative does not qualify as a myth. I am not referring to existential, social, ontological, gnoseological, fantastical, or esoteric transcendence, but specifically to mythological transcendence.

In myth, transcendence is invariably sacred. Derived from the Latin *sacrātum*, meaning 'dedicated to the gods', sacred stands in contrast to the profane, which relates solely to the human, temporal, and earthly realms (from Latin *profānus* versus *fānum*, meaning 'temple'). Within our Western tradition, the transcendences in mythologies – be they Hellenic, Roman, Judeo-Christian, Celtic, Slavic, Nordic, or Iberian – are consistently sacred. Although transcendence in myth allows for the presence of immanence, parody, and indifference, the fundamental starting point for any myth is always its sacred transcendence.

2 Traditional Myth Criticism and Cultural Myth Criticism

Cultural Myth Criticism studies mythological narratives with particular attention to the original transcendence of myth and its exponential disappearance throughout literary history. As a result, it includes amongst its main tasks the study of the processes of mythification and demystification in literary texts and their artistic manifestations.

Myth criticism is the discipline dedicated to studying myths. Established as an interdisciplinary field, it intersects with various humanities and social sciences such as sociology, ethnology, anthropology, religious studies, philosophy, literary theory, and literary history.

1 Losada (2022: 193) [translation by myself].

Influential thinkers such as James George Frazer, Ernst Cassirer, Joseph Campbell, and Gilbert Durand, along with psychologists like Carl Jung and sociologists like Roger Caillois, have deepened our understanding of symbolic thought, the unconscious, and the collective imaginary. However, the contributions from related disciplines – ethnography, philosophy, history, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and literary criticism – often suffer from an excessive emphasis on peripheral aspects of the myth, as if it only deserved study from their disciplinary perspectives.

To these scientifically valid approaches (although clearly biased towards disciplines adjacent to myth criticism), others have been added that only hunt in foreign territory. The emergence of these surreptitious, poacher pseudo-myth criticisms – as seen in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Roland Barthes, and Donna Haraway – illustrates a further deviation from genuine mythological inquiry. These approaches often disregard true myths, either reducing them to mere themes, motifs, symbols, or conflating them with psychological sublimations, social obsessions, and urban beliefs. We are far from the terrain and interests of myth.

Similarly, scholars in religious studies like Mircea Eliade and literary theorists such as Northrop Frye and Robert Segal have further explored the interconnections of religious beliefs and their literary expressions. Traditional myth critics like Georges Dumézil, Hans Blumenberg, Kurt Hübner, and Pierre Brunel have contributed significantly by establishing paradigmatic systems and clarifying the meanings of mythic narratives within their original sources, evolution, and contexts. This traditional approach to myth criticism proves effective when examining myths in pre-modern literature, identifying literary sources, tracing linguistic evolution, exploring intertextual relationships, and understanding social, psychological, and anthropological dimensions. However, again, its utility primarily benefits the auxiliary disciplines rather than myth criticism itself. Traditional myth criticism often fails to adequately analyse the authentically mythical elements within narratives.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge the valuable insights of traditional myth criticism, it has become partly inoperative for two reasons: it often subordinates mythological study to other scientific disciplines, and it overlooks the contemporary societal factors that influence the reception of myths.

A new, autonomous, and contemporary form of myth criticism is essential – one that effectively addresses the challenges of understanding and interpreting myths within the complex framework of modern cultural contexts. This innovative approach seeks to revitalise the study of myths by focusing on their intrinsic elements and contemporary relevance.

3 Methodology

Cultural Myth Criticism aims to synthesise the evolution of myths within the complex contemporary context – tracking their origins, development, and processes of demystification and remythification. This approach is bidirectional: on one hand, it examines myths from a contemporary perspective; on the other, it studies our own era through these same myths. This dual examination deepens our understanding of both the myths themselves and our current cultural realities.

To achieve this, Cultural Myth Criticism adopts a tripartite analytical methodology: it examines the factors that condition the study of the myth itself, explores the various functions of the myth, and outlines the essential criteria for working with myths.

3.1 Factors in a New Era for the Study of Myth

The first analysis focuses on the conditions affecting the understanding of mythological narratives today. This involves considering a series of high-impact socio-cultural factors: globalisation, relativism, and immanence. These three factors shape our contemporary Western society and profoundly affect the representation and effectiveness of traditional myths.

Many researchers, influenced by these factors, struggle to comprehend the significance of myths. Consequently, the cultural, ideological, and economic conditions of our society have led to three fundamental changes in the analysis of mythology:

- They have significantly altered the concept, reception, and dissemination of myths.
- They have fostered the creation of a new mythology, often spurious, that frequently conflicts with authentic myths.
- They have blurred the boundaries between the notion of myth and other concepts of different origins.

With the ensured interaction of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, a new myth criticism must adapt to our time's new ways of thinking. These factors or phenomena factually impact all members of contemporary society. They are considered logics because they establish a new way of thinking about the world beyond material considerations. They are trends because they depend on the course of general events and chart the paths humanity will follow for an indeterminate time.

Rethinking myth in light of these factors will undoubtedly help redefine the new directions of myth criticism. This involves establishing some necessary conditions for the epistemology of Cultural Myth Criticism: a methodology adapted

to new times must explain how exogenous influences, relativist character, and the postponement of transcendence affect the reception of mythological narratives.

3.1.1 The Phenomenon of Globalisation

Globalisation, a multifaceted process involving cultural, social, political, economic, and technological aspects, has led to a world where national boundaries blur, cultures intermingle, and societies become more interconnected. This trend, which took off in the late 20th century with the end of the Cold War and the rise of the internet, has integrated local cultures into a global narrative where diverse cultural practices and products circulate freely across continents.

While globalisation has facilitated the spread of cultural products and ideas, it has also sparked debates about its impact on local identities and traditions. Historically distinct identities and their unique cultural practices are now under pressure from a homogenizing global culture that favors uniformity over diversity. This has led to the rise of anti-globalisation movements that resist this trend, championing local and community identities against the overarching influence of global forces. These movements argue against the loss of cultural specificity and fight for the preservation of marginalised cultures, which are often overshadowed in a globalised world.

The clash between globalisation and myth is particularly poignant. Myths, which are deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts and histories, face challenges in a globalised world where they risk becoming homogenised or trivialised. The traditional narratives and the rich diversity of myths catering to specific cultural or ethnic contexts struggle to maintain their relevance and integrity against a global narrative that tends to prioritise economic and technological efficiency over cultural depth.

Despite the efforts of anti-globalisation advocates, the relentless advance of globalisation seems inevitable due to the technological interconnectedness and economic interdependencies it fosters. The spread of the internet and the integration of global markets make reversing this trend difficult, if not impossible. Myths, in this context, are not just relics of the past but serve as a testament to the diversity of human experience and belief systems. They offer a counter-narrative to the global push towards uniformity, advocating for a world where diversity is not just tolerated but celebrated as essential to the human experience.

In summary, globalisation presents a formidable challenge to the preservation of mythological traditions. While it promotes an interconnected world, it also poses the risk of diluting the rich tapestry of myths that define and enrich various cultures. The ongoing tension between global uniformity and the preservation of diverse cultural narratives like myths is a central theme in understanding the broader implications of globalisation.

3.1.2 The Doxa of Relativism

Rooted in the ideological shifts of the late 18th and 19th centuries, relativism advocates for the idea that all truths are relative and subject to the individual's perspective and cultural background. This view challenges the traditional and absolute frameworks of myth, which often postulate universal truths and principles that transcend individual and cultural variations.

At the heart of relativism lies a significant tension between objectivism and subjectivism, influencing how myths are interpreted and understood. Relativism questions the existence of any universal or absolute truths beyond personal or cultural interpretations, promoting a view that all understanding is inherently subjective. This stance fundamentally opposes the mythic structure, which typically asserts fixed and unchanging truths about the world and human nature, such as the superiority of gods or the inevitability of fate.

Furthermore, the rise of relativism has led to a reinterpretation of myths within contemporary contexts, often aligning them with modern values and perspectives that may stray significantly from their original meanings. This modern recontextualization can dilute the profound, intended messages of myths, reducing their rich narratives to mere subjects of personal or cultural reinterpretation.

Relativism challenges the stability and authority of mythological narratives, creating an ongoing intellectual struggle to balance contemporary ideological perspectives with the traditional values encapsulated in myths. This tension between viewpoints exemplifies broader cultural debates about the nature of truth, knowledge, and the potential universality of certain human experiences.

3.1.3 The Logic of Immanence

In relation to the 'factors' shaping our contemporary society, I have previously suggested that we could also call them 'logics', as they reveal a new way of thinking about the world. Clearly, I do not refer to logic as a formal discipline or the art of correct reasoning, but rather to the dynamic accumulation of concepts and practical judgments made by our thought about beings that phenomenologically circumscribe our experiential perception of the world.

Indeed, our reflection and experience shape in our consciousness a phenomenological framework that almost inevitably conditions each of our approaches to each new experience. One cannot tell how much this affects the way we understand ancient, medieval, and modern mythology today.

Broadly and generally, postmodern individuals can only perceive everything around them in a globalised, relativistic, and immanent way. Among these logics, two are of particular interest for Cultural Myth Criticism: the logic of immanence and the logic of transcendence.

The concept of immanence can be considered from gnoseological, ontological, and epistemological perspectives. Here, it is used as an index of an existence correlative to our sensible world in relation to another external or transcendent one, both equally entitative and necessary for the mythical event. In the literary and artistic realm of myth, there are two possible worlds: one similar to ours in every way, with its earthly sphere and countless galaxies, and another, also similar to ours but not in every way, where beings of a divine, supernatural nature dwell. The primary world is immanent with respect to the ‘other’, secondary or transcendent world. Every mythological narrative tells of the extraordinary event in which two dimensions, immanent and transcendent, collide.

All of a sudden, in the diegesis of the story, a sacred character from the transcendent world bursts in and interacts with one or more characters from the immanent world: two vital and physical entities from different worlds, irreducible, meet temporally and fictionally. Then, in that clash, myth takes place.

Much of modern thought has confined reality to our sensible universe, thereby adopting an immanentism that denies any form of transcendence. This shift reflects the psychological fixation of modernity on autonomy.² Transcendence greatly expands the spectrum of realities, bringing with it ungraspable uncertainties and even laws that human nature must adhere to.

Given the progressive disbelief in the West – attributable to both past exegetical errors and the heightened positivism of modernity – combined with our innate aversion to heteronomy, people today often adopt what might be called the ‘ostrich tactic’: either denying the existence of other worlds or overlooking the pervasive influence of immanentism, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Herein lie, to a great extent, the difficulties many researchers encounter in fully understanding myths: the practical denial of transcendence can unconsciously lead to rejecting its possibility of existence even in a fictional world. The interpretation of mythical narratives becomes arduous, if not unfeasible, when severed from their transcendent dimension, as transcendence and myth are inseparably intertwined.

Ancient extinct religions such as those of the Celts, Iberians, Greeks, Romans, Scandinavians, Germans, and Slavs – as well as current polytheistic religions like Hinduism and Jainism, and monotheistic ones including Judaism, Christianity,

2 Critics identify Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (*Oratio de hominis dignitate*, 1486) as the starting gun for the race towards absolute appropriation of free will. In this Renaissance manifesto, the author explains that, unlike other creatures, whose traits are set by specific rules, Adam is uniquely granted the freedom to choose his own nature. This free will, bestowed by a higher power, allows him to shape his identity as he sees fit. This marked the beginning of an exponential progression of autonomy in Western thought, particularly across three fundamental realms: epistemological (R. Descartes), political (J.-J. Rousseau), and moral (I. Kant); see Losada (2022: 88–89).

and Islam – enrich literary and artistic works with a wealth of myths that engage with transcendence. This is also true for some ancient and contemporary spiritual currents like Gnosticism, esotericism, and New Age.

In their study of artistic manifestations, proponents of Cultural Myth Criticism must combine academic rigour with an exquisite respect for all sensible ethical and religious perspectives, integrating methods open to understanding the transcendence inherent in all mythical production. This approach remains valid even for interpretations that dispense with, or even parody, this intertwining. Cultural Myth Criticism does not presuppose any religious stance; it achieves scientific status only through preserving its analytical methods, synthetic experiments, and the subsequent universal verification of its results, within the bounds required by the humanities.

Just as the primarily individual Western religious phenomenon does not contradict its collective dimension, so too does the mythical one: both exhibit characteristics that are simultaneously individual and collective. They shape a culture, endorse historical realities, influence economic conditions, explain social behaviours, legitimise political statuses, and establish ethical values.³

3.2 Referential Functions of Myth

The concept of function provides a useful analogy for understanding myths. A function establishes a systematic relationship between elements of two sets, where the output from set Y depends on inputs from set X. Unlike the mathematical function, the literary function always presents a wide range of possibilities due to the contingent nature of the writer, the medium, and the recipient. This is explained by formalist, structuralist, and semiological studies. Scholars like Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Claude Bremond have highlighted narrative functions and their order, showing how these functions manifest consistently across different stories and cultural artifacts. These narrative functions, whether denoting the actions of characters or the symbolic significance of events, are crucial in literary analysis and interpretation.

There is a realm where function presents an even greater range of possibilities: myth, where the relationship between literature and religion expands into the supernatural world. While it is true that forms, structures, and signs expand the immense range of traditional functions of myths, it must never be forgotten that every function should be subordinate to the general framework of transcendent referentiality, without which there is no myth.

Deep in the forest, Actaeon unexpectedly observes the naked beauty of the goddess Artemis taking a bath. To be discovered or not adds literary suspense to

3 For an extended discussion on this topic, see Losada (2022: 355–370).

the voyeurism. However, the hunter could never have imagined that his recklessness would lead to his metamorphosis. In the mythological narrative, the literary function is not only formal, structural, and semiological: it is also categorical and transcendental.

3.2.1 The Referential Framework of the Myth

Three types of references are crucial within myth: textual, chronological, and categorical. Textual references involve direct narrative components and their intertextual connections. Chronological references position myths within absolute time frameworks rather than historical timelines. Categorical references navigate the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence, essential for differentiating narrative and symbolic layers in myths.

This transcendence becomes apparent in mythic texts when referencing realities beyond mere possibility. In the TV series *American Gods* (First Season), Laura Moon, initially a sceptic of the afterlife, changes her beliefs after a near-death experience that reveals a transcendent reality. This narrative synthesis of immanent and transcendent realities demonstrates how myths blend natural and supernatural dimensions, affirming their existence.

3.2.2 The Hermeneutic Circle of Myth

The hermeneutic approach emphasises the interdependence of textual elements and their functions. Myths, rich with functions guiding interpretations, convey transcendent messages. It is crucial to respect the text's integrity while using interpretative tools to uncover its deeper meanings. Myths feature etiological (causal) and teleological (purpose-oriented) functions. Etiological functions explain the origins of phenomena, while teleological functions relate to the objectives that myths articulate. Key teleological functions include the didactic and subversive functions. The didactic function aids in explaining the origins and purposes of the world, while the subversive function challenges these narratives, offering alternative truths and stimulating critical reflection.

For example, philosophers like Plato used myth-related narratives to articulate complex concepts accessibly, as seen in *Phaedrus* where he describes the soul's nature through myth. Historical adaptations, such as Calderón's interpretation of the Daphne myth in *The Laurel of Apollo*, demonstrate how myths have been used to impart moral lessons and reflect cultural values. Myths, thus, serve to educate and challenge societal norms, maintaining their relevance and potency across different cultures and epochs.

Despite the shift towards modern scientific reasoning, myths continue to provide a unique lens through which to view the world, offering insights into human

nature, societal structures, and the interplay between immanent and transcendent realities. Through their referential functions, myths remain a fundamental element in cultural discourse, capable of conveying complex truths and facilitating a deeper understanding of our world and existence.⁴

3.3 Methodological Criteria

Next, for the sake of clarity, I will succinctly present the main criteria of Cultural Myth Criticism. First are the Transcendental Criteria (3.3.1), outlined in detail in the preceding pages. From these, the remaining criteria related to the structuring and imaginary of myth (3.3.2), its reception and classification (3.3.3), and the epistemological foundation of the discipline (3.3.4) are deduced.

3.3.1 Transcendental Criteria

Starting with a Definition: It is crucial to begin with an academic definition. Researchers should always adopt a coherent definition of myth and work ‘inside’ the myth and ‘for’ the myth. Their focus should be directed towards a primary and irreplaceable objective of the mythological narrative: ‘Where is myth?’ Other elements such as motifs, themes, types, figures, archetypes, and symbols are systemic and essential, but should never be conflated with secondary elements.

Awareness of Contemporary Influences: Researchers should exercise caution regarding factors that shape the imagination of our society, which is openly resistant to integrating transcendence. By acknowledging the distorting effects of the phenomenon of globalisation, the doxa of relativism, and the logic of immanence, researchers will be better equipped to analyze the reception of myths in literary texts and artistic works appropriately.

Exploring Deeper Dimensions: Research should delve into the ontological and onomasiological dimensions of myth. Beyond the semiotic and semiological references, the myth unfolds both metaphorically and metonymically at the paradigmatic and syntactic levels, always open to transcendence.

3.3.2 Structural and Imaginary Criteria

Identifying Mythemes: The task is to identify the mythemes that shape each myth. ‘A mytheme is the minimal thematic and mythological unit whose indispensable transcendent or supernatural dimension enables it to interact with other mythemes in the formation of a myth.’⁵ Unlike themes, mythemes carry a unique mythical valence that distinguishes them (e.g., metamorphosis or fortune-telling

4 For a more in-depth discussion on this topic, see Losada (2022: 271–299 and 2024).

5 Losada (2022: 536) [translation by myself].

are themes; they become mythical only when marked by a transcendent, mythical valence). The organisation of mythemes differentiates one myth from another, and the disappearance or integration of a mytheme can explain changes or declines in a myth's influence.

Relationship with Supernatural Narratives: This criterion addresses the myth's relationship with other narratives that also incorporate elements of the supernatural imaginary, primarily found in esotericism and fantasy (science fiction is always anti-mythical⁶). Cultural Myth Criticism places special emphasis on distinguishing these different imaginaries, each characterised by its own form of transcendence.

The Role of Magic: Researchers should consider that magic does not belong to any specific imaginary; instead, it is a tool that manifests the eternal human ambition to transform the world through supernatural means. Characters use magic to bypass the determinism of the world through whimsical, deterministic procedures.

3.3.3 Reception-related Criteria

Studying Myth Reception: The reception of myths requires an analysis of both the diachronic and synchronic dimensions, focusing on how myths are received and accepted. Myths are susceptible to momentary or prolonged crises, known as demystification processes, which are sometimes followed by remythification.

Developing a Myth Typology: Researchers should undertake various classifications of myths based on different criteria: periodic relative chronology (ancient, medieval, modern, contemporary); absolute chronology (cosmological, eschatological); and linguistic-geographic parameters (Greco-Roman, Old Testament, Celtic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric myths).

This also includes developing a typology of pseudo-myths, encompassing historical figures (Napoleon, Marilyn Monroe), pharmacological inventions (Prozac, Viagra), ideologies (Nazism, Communism), and societal intentions (everlasting progress).

3.3.4 Epistemological Criteria

Ensuring Discipline Autonomy: Myth criticism must be regarded as an autonomous discipline, avoiding any subordinate use by other disciplines such as sociology (myth as obsession) or psychoanalysis (myth as sublimation). However, collaboration with these disciplines in the study of myths is encouraged.

Interdisciplinary Approaches: A multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach is crucial. Highlighting the analysis of the symbolic imaginary, mytho-

6 On this topic of pressing relevance, see Losada (2021).

logical studies should permeate all cultural expressions, including literature, visual arts, music, and performing arts.

These are the main criteria of Cultural Myth Criticism.⁷ The aim of this new theory and methodology is to deepen understanding of the current, diverse, and complex world through the lens of myths. Grasping myth in contemporary contexts is crucial for researchers to first engage with their own awareness and then with the external world. This process allows the translation of knowledge from mythological narratives into a greater ability to communicate their enriching messages in today's society.

This hermeneutic process, characteristic of all coherent human sciences, is particularly suited for studying myth, one of the most evocative narratives of the mysterious condition of human beings. If the heuristic operability of my definition of myth is confirmed, and the outlined factors and functions are suitably combined, Cultural Myth Criticism aspires to become a valid interpretative key for the new individual and collective consciousness.

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7 Since 2007, a group of researchers from the Universidad Complutense and various universities in ten countries across Europe and America have spearheaded several initiatives focused on mythological studies, particularly emphasising their contemporary reception. These initiatives include *ACIS, Research Group in Myth Criticism, Asteria, International Association of Myth Criticism*, and *Amaltea, Journal of Myth Criticism*. Additionally, they have organised eight International Conferences on Myth Criticism and conducted five Research Projects in this field. This collaborative effort has culminated in the development of a new branch of myth criticism, which aims to clearly define myth, establish a coherent methodological approach, and lay down the epistemological groundwork for the discipline. To know more about the emergence of this theory, see Losada (2023).