

Contemporary Mythologies – Tradition, Synchronism, Proximity

Xenia Negrea

University of Medicine and Pharmacy from Craiova

Nicu Gavriluță, *Why do we like superheroes? The mythology and symbolism of the Marvel movies, Polirom, Iași, 2022*

A logic interrogation gives the title of this work signed by Nicu Gavriluță, a sociologist and an anthropologist, an author of several important works for the academic references of these two fields of knowledge. It may seem like a risky idea, doing an incursion into the world of cinema, into the world of superheroes, and not having the area of aesthetics as main objectives. In fact, after reading this book, the critical and academic approach to this cinematic area is revealed as an incursion into the area of the most intimate and vigorous motivation of the human condition. After we finish reading, we see how the hedonism invoked in the title shows its functionalist, instrumentalist meaning and we guess the true question: *Why do we need superheroes?*

Contemporary cinema is one of (if not the most) vigorous source of education and inspiration for designing individuality and society. It is a source of ideology, a source of knowledge, a behavioral benchmark. For several decades, cinematic tools have dominated professional and organizational communication, including the field of media. We can talk about cinematography even as an (extremely effective) communication tool.

But the study we are analyzing goes much further in the field of cinematography, towards the intersection between the image as a tool and the imagination as a source of pleasure, but, in the same time, source of knowledge. In this central point of cinema, the anthropologist Nicu Gavriluță noticed a reiteration of mystical behavior, the appetite for overdetermination of human nature. Following Mircea Eliade and other great researchers in the religious area, Nicu Gavriluță actually observes and describes the immanent, coherent and permanent connection between the various ages of mythic-religious understanding.

The (Hollywood-like) superhero dissimulates, "conceals", the shaping figures of the great mythological heroes. More clearly: "mass media and cinema mythicize the world once again" (27) observes Nicu Gavriluță, following Aleks Wansbrough. It is precisely thanks to this unbroken and uncontaminated genealogical thread why are justified the major objective of the book. From our point of views, this major objective is to identify a conceptual reality, of determining the "mythology and symbolism of Marvel's films". Both mythology and symbolism are results of knowledge gained over centuries of narratives that have accumulated, reformulated, recontextualized, reinterpreted, repositioned cores of meaning that would exclude the recent construction of cinema and, even more so, fantasy films. This evolution of symbolic thought is described by the anthropologist in this study, emphasizing the essential profit. The new type of mythological world is, above all, accessible to everyone. Anyone, with a family tree or not, can be a hero or a superhero: "not all superheroes came from noble families. As a rule, American superheroes are scientists (...), generous wartime volunteers (...), ex-prisoners (...), mercenaries and assassins (...), students" (22).

But financial and symbolic capital success emerges from the history we assumed suspended. The Copernican revolution, the disenchantment of the world, the Heideggerian critique of humanism, the Nietzschean nihilism, which seemed to change so much, the postmodernist demystification actually counterbalances the doxa and relaunches the competition. This seems to be one of the most important results of this interdisciplinary study, with so many valences and implications: "(super)heroes embody values and provide models of life. He acts, often exemplary, in the interest of the many. The ultimate message of Marvel's superhero movies is that we can have excellence as our life model. It is important to have ideals and give a meaning to our life. The superhero constantly invites you to activate the best of your human nature" (33).

The approach of the anthropologist Nicu Gavriluță offers a very useful reading grid for the media world, for the visual culture that defines the broad field of current communication. Starting from the theoretical portrait of the hero that he builds in the first part of the work and going through the applications that he makes on each type of hero, the result is a discovery of a mythology from our proximity, temporally, but also spatially.