Saturday, 10 November 2018

Horizontes (from *Guiné* series) | 2015 | Filipe Branquinho

MYTHOLOGY
AND MEMORY

Roberto Vecchi

Neuroscience has not yet fully explained how memory functions. Nevertheless, a cultural perspective gives us some leads. An enormous archive of artistic works stage the desire to salvage the past. In the terms set up by Walter Benjamin's discussion of Proust, these works can, often figuratively, show us the warp of Penelope's web of memory.

We lack metaphors to express memory or its opposite, forgetting. But as Harald Weinrich has pointed out, representations of memory in Western histories of ideas tend to appeal to one of two essential archetypes. First, the warehouse, connected to rhetoric and memory. Second, the slate, originally a Platonic idea, linked to remembering.

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That memory is often articulated metaphorically points to a basic truth: that we always get stuck when we try to delimit any definition of memory too strictly. Memory is always mediated. Mediators, in Aleida Assman's terminology, give a concrete form to the fluidity, complexity and slipperiness of memory and remembering; through mediators, memory becomes material, both physical and metaphysical.

Myth plays an important role as a mediator of memory. Access to the past is not always mediated through exclusive or direct experience of things that have happened. Rather, past events acquire meaning through their insertion into the differentiated fields of cultural, symbolic, and visual archetypes.

Establishing a connection between myth and memory requires that we confront the porousness of any definition of myth. In anthropology or philosophy myth might be well defined and categorized. In other parts of culture, by contrast, myth is commonly used in ways that cross boundaries of genre. In functional and less abstract terms, classical Greek poetry sees myth as a counterpoint to *logos* because *logos*, like myth, is composed of words and speech, though is motivated by logic. On the contrary, myth derives from oral traditions and has its roots in the fantastic. At the same time, although myth does not need reality to acquire meaning, it does maintain some contact with experience and the world, as a kind of reality-in-disguise. This consideration allows us to see that myth and metaphor (as myth made manifest), work analogously in the sense that both are constituted by a certain anti-mimesis. The relational dimension is important as myth can refer back to foundational cultural events, whether real or imagined. Communities can come to understand themselves through these myths that conserve a memory of their origins.

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In the late 1950s, Roland Barthes highlighted ideological configurations at work in mythology. His argument drew on metaphors that allowed him to closely read cultural phenomena, including mass and consumer culture. Myth functions not to cover things up, but instead to deform and condition them by naturalizing their decay and artificiality. Thus mythology offers a powerful magnifying glass that can enlarge hidden and less visible aspects of modern societies.

Working with myth can give us exceptional access to the past, especially when this past is not fully visible in its constituent facts. The possibilities of such an approach are clear in Eduardo

Lourenço's most popular essay, "Mythical Psychoanalysis of Portuguese Destiny", in *The Labyrinth of Nostalgia*, written forty years ago. The book offers an incisive interpretation of a period of crisis in the Portuguese ontology.

Lourenço probes a deep rupture in the historical mythologies through which Portugal has always understood itself. In Lourenço's work, irrealism, the active function of myth, and traumatic traces of history are the raw ingredients for the new perspective and uncomplacent irreverence he brings to bear in understanding the past. Deconstructing this a distorted and indecipherable past is possible precisely because the fiction of myth corrodes the 'fact' of history. Lourenço repurposes self-critique to understand the deep functioning of the Portuguese collective consciousness in the face of historical catastrophes. He calls this process psychoanalysis, but it could also be called mythocriticism. For Lourenço, knowledge of the past emerges through his work on a mainly literary archive, through the analysis of myths and metaphor which shaped the self-centred idea of a Portuguese destiny.

Lourenço's critical gesture shows us how cultural memory relates to the profound force of mythology. Crystallized images of the past offer an analytical field in which to deconstruct and analyse memory, and also reveal the active role of myth in the construction of memory. The interpretive challenge is not separating myth from fact in order to be sure what these facts are, but understanding how the intimate articulation of history operates through the imaginative entanglement of myth and fact. Mythology mediates the past in the present, and functions as an image filter that participates in the syncopated relation between the past 'that happened' and its - partial, selective, conditioned – reconstruction in the present. Myths act as the *imagines agentes* of classical mnemonics: the active or activating images whose force enables things to become fixed in memory. The force of myth renders its image unforgettable and serves to support and boost memory more broadly.

In this vein, myth plays a role in the conservation and transmission of the past. In our discussion of post-memory, it is essential to acknowledge the function of myth in the passage of time, within a context eroded by time. In relation to the past, memory is a double agent: it mythologizes the past and, in turn, is mythologized by it. For example, recovering the experience of a symbolically-demarcated period such as childhood projects an idealised time, just as the cultural mythology of

childhood (which often indexes childhood in romantic terms) itself mediates any evocation of a particular past. As such, the double hand of mythology will always condition images we recover and shape both the selection of materials and points of view. This does not make it any less real. Myth both conceals and reveals the ideology that inscribes it. It is worth bearing in mind that memory is a simulacrum in which what is at stake is not what is true or false, but the widest possible subjective access to the fruition of past time. The question arises: how much do myths, as mediators, favour or impede the transmission of interpersonal memory? Especially given that the function of the active images which constitute myth is to strengthen the relation (or fracture) of belonging that establishes itself between past and present, between one generation and another. If myths are a naturalized and therefore sometimes invisible part of memory, what matters is the use to which they are put, and the duplications, deformations or reformulations produced in different contexts.

I recently had the opportunity to participate in an interesting colloquium in Bissau, organized by the CES-UC's CROME project, "Memories and legacies of the liberation struggles". In the discussions, a sometimes radical divergence emerged between the generation that had achieved independence – the only independence won militarily in the anti-colonial struggle against the Portuguese – and a younger generation critical of the mistakes that came to mark the post-independence period, and which contributed to Guinea's serious and undeniable development problems. At the same time, it was clear that these conflicting perspectives were founded on a common mythology: a sense of the importance of Amilcar Cabral's praxis in building the country's independence. The substrate these different memories and reconstructions shared underlines how myth can function as a disguise, and can be deployed by different and even conflicting ideologies. It also shows how rebuilding community relations and bonds of belonging is an ongoing process.

This common ground shows above all how memory and mythology are vessels that communicate a single process of reconstructing the past. What this past looks like depends on the modes of its (re)production; on how myths and memory are reused and repurposed. This process of reconstruction protects the past against the insults of time, and makes possible its very transmission and translation from one generation to another.

Translated by Alexandra Reza.

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Roberto Vecchi is a professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature in the Department of Literature and Modern Cultures of the University of Bologna. He has recently published, with Vincenzo Russo, *La letteratura portoghese. I testi e le idee* (2017). He is an associate researcher with the project *MEMOIRS: Children of Empire and European Postmemories* (ERC n. 648624).