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***ON MARVEL SUPERHEROES, THEIR MYTHOLOGY AND SYMBOLS.
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NICU GAVRILUȚĂ***

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***On Marvel Superheroes, Their Mythology
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Mitologia și simbolistica filmelor Marvel /
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and Symbolism of Marvel Movies.***
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Abstract

The current review invites on reflection on Marvel superheroes, their mythology and symbols, through the lenses of a reputed sociologist from Romanian academia.

Keywords: Marvel superheroes, Nordic and Chinese mythology, national symbols, initiation journeys.

Professor Nicu Gavriluță's book brings into play, in Romania(n), the much-debated topic of American superheroes, more specifically, *Marvel*, in comic strips, and on the screen. Inspired by his daughter's passion for the movies, in a hermeneutical and narrative stance, he aims at discussing the magical and religious myths and symbols of these superheroes, as seen in the movies. According to the preface, the author considers this to be a confusing endeavour, from a philosophical perspective, that purports to account for a socio-anthropological analysis of the superheroes' adventures, hence the selection of movies and motives encountered in them (p. 11). Apart from overviewing the movies chosen, the book also answers a series of questions that any reader may ask him-/herself, whether the archetype of the camouflaged hero survives in our life, or if the movies truly bring forth the best version of ourselves, through the imaginary transcendence of human nature (p. 12).

Divided into twelve chapters, the volume also contains an epilogue in which ten answers are given to the question asked in the title, why we like superheroes. The first chapter is an introductory one, dealing with the mythologies of the (super)hero; in the sub-chapter on the exemplary figure of the universal hero, Alex Mihai Stoenescu's 2019 treaty of general historiography is quoted to support the claim that, in history, the hero becomes a role model for those that knew him. N.

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Gavriliuță argues that the existence of a hero is situated at the border of people and gods, they are intermediaries between the heavens and the earth, with Herakles or Ulysses as archetypes in Greek mythology (p. 15). Similar to ancient heroes, they are superhumans, yet not divine, according to Mircea Eliade, and their powers are still active in their dead bodies, being able to achieve either ultimate good or evil (p. 17). The author is interested in their special relation with combat and their eccentric, sometimes erratic behaviour (p. 18). Initiation is an essential condition of heroic life that every individual is subjected to, after 25-30 years of age, when dependency on family should end (p. 19). Books and movies make us rediscover myths and heroes' initiation journeys seeking immortality or the world's salvation (p. 20). Today's superheroes are different from heroes in ancient times (as portrayed by Otto Rank), and the Marvel ones make no exception: they are partially encountered in the classic narratives from world cultures and mythologies, they do not necessarily come from noble families, and there is a lack of prophecies with respect to their arrival. They are composite figures of social imagery, not manifestations of the sacred, camouflaged in the profane world (pp. 22-23).

The author departs from the premise that any present human community needs its superheroes, and media contributes to the popularity of myths. An instance of a modern superhero would be Superman, characterised by Mihaela Petrov as an embodiment of super force, super speed, super resistance, super vision, super memory, super intelligence, etc. According to Eliade, this satisfies the secret nostalgia of modern man who, in his fallen state, dreams of becoming an exceptional, heroic character one day; also, in Gilles Lipovetsky's terms, the hero's success owes to a society of overconsumption, obsessed by performance, money and overcoming one's limits (pp. 28-29). In the postmodern American context, they are obsessed to hide their identity, defined in relation to alterity, the more alien, the better (p. 30). However, nowadays, the ideal of the superhero has shifted to figures that are closer to us, imperfect humans with their diseases and fears, due to the contributions of the writer Stan Lee and the artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko (p. 31). Heroes can, furthermore, be used as role models to teach religious studies as characters of modern parables, and help students acquire sacred values and learn about religious traditions (Gregory J. Watkins, Melanie J. Wright, pp. 32-33). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our self-evasion and refuge (as understood by the French sociologist, David Le Breton) into Marvel movies is deeper, hence the psychomental mechanism of duplicity in the avatars of the virtual world (p. 36).

The second chapter focuses on Iron Man, a transhumanist superhero that is the alter ego of the eccentric and narcissist billionaire, Tony Stark (p. 38). The three Iron Man movies are reviewed and, according to prof. N. Gavriliuță, in the second one, we bear witness the utopia of salvation through new technologies (p. 41). The third movie shows us that every man creates his own demons, and is a lesson on DNA manipulation and the creation of perfect soldiers (p. 44). The author concludes that Iron Man is a typical Marvel superhero, and meets the horizon of

expectation of a large Western audience. In his features, we only encounter some traits of the classic hero such as the passion for adventure, compassion, exceptional combat skills, etc. and, thanks to new technologies, he transcends human condition, without fully fulfilling its might. In his transhumanism, Iron Man foreshadows the man of the future, a dignified layman with inevitable vices: excessive pride, eccentricity, and exhibitionism (pp. 48-49).

The third chapter deals with the incredible Hulk, the mutant superhero whose alter ego (the irrational forces of the unconscious in Jung's terms, p. 52) is a green monster that needs controlling through breathing exercises as in yoga techniques. The scientist Bruce Banner lives with this archetype of the shadow in a Dr. Jekyll – Mr. Hyde way, fighting the evil in the world and his own dark side.

The fourth chapter is devoted to Captain America, the leader of superheroes and national symbol. Steve Rogers is a virtuous superhero that was once a short, weak man who became a super soldier as a result of an experiment, an enhancement serum reactivating his good human nature (p. 60). Drawing on Nazi ideology, the theme of the superior man is brought into play, along with that of secret societies, as Hydra, another Grand Inquisitor that manipulated the world, had an equivalent in history. The third movie of the series introduces the android Vision, his ability to go through a wall reminding us, according to the author, of the famous *siddhi* powers of yoga masters (p. 73).

“Thor and the Eternal Fascination of Nordic Mythologies” is the title of the fifth chapter which accounts for Thor's first epiphany on our planet; the first science fiction movies starring the Scandinavian god draw on the religious history of old Germanic tribes. Thor's magic hammer is also a symbolical image of lightning, compared by Eliade to *vajra*, a special weapon of the Hindu god, Indra. The god's name is still encountered in many toponyms (for instance, in Kyiv, a temple was built in his honour as correspondence was found with a local god) (p. 80). In the case of Odin, his portrayal is accurate, including the missing eye sacrificed to gain wisdom; he enjoyed tremendous popularity in the '30s, due to the rise of national socialism, and animals were sacrificed on his behalf, thus showcasing the irrational *furor teutonicus* lying in the depth of German mentality, according to Jung's essay on the topic (p. 85). To a point, Loki resembles the *trickster* in American culture and is depicted in the movies as an archetype of a malevolent Christian god (pp. 89-90). The myth of the end of the world is also present as Ragnarok, first mentioned in the second century, and embodied in the creation of the universe, in Nordic mythology (p. 103).

The sixth chapter overviews the Guardians of the Galaxy movies, labelled as masters of the fight against cosmic evil by professor Gavriluță; drawing on international criticism (Joseph Campbell) and myth dictionary compilers (Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant), the author argues that a semi/half god was born from a human parent and a god (here Peter Quill from Ego and an earthling), hence the dramatic condition of the fallen god, and the glorious one of the deified man; he has

a thousand faces, he is a prim(ordi)al hero, a man, a warrior, a lover, an emperor, a tyrant, a saviour of the world, a saint, etc. (pp. 105-106). He also brings into play Jung's theory for whom the figure of the hero equals the extraordinary force of the spirit (p. 107). The *Marvel* movies also found inspiration for the infinity stones in world mythologies of sacred stones, their value of symbolic weapons probably deriving from René Guénon's work, *Symbols of Sacred Science* (p. 108). The end of the third movie in which Peter's adoptive father, Yondu Udonta, sacrifices himself for his son to live, thus being rehabilitated at a cosmic scale, is contrasted by the author to the parable of the rabbi Eisik from Krakow, outlined by Heinrich Zimmer in his *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (pp. 115-116).

The seventh chapter depicts Ant Man and the Wasp, as superheroes initiated in the secrets of the quantum realm. There lies a paradox and an ambivalence in the symbolism of the wasp that embodies elegance and war, is both agile in battle and capable of sacrifice, according to Ivan Essev's encyclopaedia of religious symbols and cultural archetypes. If world traditions still preserve images and representations of various metamorphoses of gods into insects (e.g., in Siberia it is thought that, when a shaman dies, he turns into a wasp to go to heaven, and in old Greek mythology ant men were believed to be descendants of Myrmidon) in the movies, a woman scientist discovers a particle and gains access to the quantum world (p. 118-120), and defies the Copenhagen interpretation (pp. 122-123).

Chapter 8 is devoted to Doctor Strange and the mysteries of mystic arts, the character of the Ancient One and the Centre of Mystic Arts lying at the centre of the religious and philosophical substance of the movie. Doctor Strange embodies modern science in its experimental, dimension and classic Western science, whereas the Ancient One is a referent of premodern magic and religious thought that lives to this day in our world, camouflaged in various hypostases. The author argues that the former is a positivist (p. 133), whereas the latter subscribes to the philosophical spirit of Samkhya-Yoga, reminding Doctor Strange that mind and matter have encountered at the origin of our existence (p. 134). A pretext to bring parallel worlds into play, as well as the multiverse, the movie makes us reflect on the correlation between the possibility of time traveling into our past (p. 135). According to professor Gavriluță, the problem of Doctor Strange is that of most Western intellectuals, unable to go beyond visible reality with their intellect and reason (137). An important mythological motif is that of the mirror, *speculum*, means of inquiry and a symbol of another reality through which other entities, demons included, could enter our world (pp. 138-139).

Chapter 9, "Spider Man, the Superhero Student", draws on the mythology of the spider, whose web is a symbol of the created universe, and the spider climbing it, an explicit expression of freedom. In this respect, the superhero Peter Parker corresponds to Brahma in Hindu mythology (p. 148), a more subtle analogy is possible through *Maya*, the cosmic illusion lacking the metaphysical substance of the world, the seduction game of appearance, and the spider's web. A hero that brings civilisation and food to people in Western Africa, where it is considered to

be a demigod, he was also attributed healing powers (p. 149), not to mention the saving of various religious characters and prophets (David, Jesus, Mohamed), by means of a spider web that protected the entrance to a cave. The spider's pride due to the craftsmanship of its web is also alluded to, yet Peter Parker has never taken responsibility for the negative component of the mythology, i.e., the spider's cunning and tricks, according to Hans Biedermann's 2002 dictionary of symbols cited by the author (p. 150). He has fought meteorological magic, air spirits or demons as defined by Antoaneta Olteanu in her 2021 Romanian Mythology volume (pp. 151-152). As opposed to the benign water spirits in mythology, the water demon resembles a golem in its anger and thirst for destruction (p. 153). Mysterio, the new god of the world of the future is finally defeated, the author praising the illusory hypostases of the reality created via the villain's technology, so efficient that they blur the line between illusion and reality, thus restating an older philosophical idea, that our phenomenal world lacks ultimate consistency (p. 156).

Chapter 10 praises the Black Panther, the totem of the superhero king from the imaginary land of Wakanda, rich in vibranium which leads to the perverse effects outlined by Raymond Boudon in sociology, a consequence of people's desire to build a paradise on earth (p. 158). An analogy could be made between this and the dwarves' greed in literature, in Tolkien's *Hobbit* for instance, where they ended up digging too deep for the Arkenstone in the mountain, thus tempting the dragon who stole their treasure and forced them into exile. The screenwriters preserved several elements from old African mythology on the cult of ancestors, such as their field and village in which the king's father reigns, and is protected by the totem of the black panther (p. 162).

Chapter 11 tackles the Avengers, elite warriors of the universe who save our planet from alien invasions. The scientist Bruce Banner is a (post)modern doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, embodying the theme of the double, as Hulk, the big green monster, comes to surface whenever he gets angry. A superhero's identity is like a game played on two paintings, according to Pierre Brunel (cited by Gavriluță, p. 170), the other two requirements being the passage from a world to another, and an easier identification of the reader with the superhero. The infinity stones are also carriers of many symbols, sacred ones, as they became instruments of spiritual, magic action, with a role of mediation, as their number, six, could be related to the days in which the universe was created, hence the manifestation principle (p. 176). In addition, they embody the *coincidentia oppositorum* principle, egoism and altruism, love and hate, etc. urging us to seek balance. Finally, the stones imply the idea of immortality, inter alia, Carl Gustav Jung's *lapis*, a universal medicine (p. 177). The time traveling in the movies makes us recall the times in fairy tales or Eliade's novellas (pp. 187-188).

Chapter 12 discusses the Chinese superheroes from *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021). Parallelism could be drawn with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, as therein the ring also symbolises the power of eternity encapsulated in the circle. Moreover, number ten is a sign of completeness as in Pythagoras's

tetrakis, not to mention the double in Chinese philosophy (pp. 194-194). The Ta Lo community of initiators in sacred arts of war is similar to Shambala in Tibetan mythology (p. 198), and the dragon is a recurrent mythological motive of Asian culture, combining both good and evil, perfection and immortality in its nature (p. 200).

In the epilogue, we are asked to reflect on the reasons why we love superheroes, a question with ten answers, according to the author. First, we enjoy them for their action, combat refinement and technical qualities, as the movie goer is willing to experience successive shocking emotions and blows, according to film studies (*cf.* Gilles Lipovetsky, Jean Serroy's *The Global Screen. Cinema and Media Culture in the Hypermodern Era*, p. 203). Second, the sound management of *Marvel* companies attracts more and more fans. Third, superhero movies bring money and social prestige (p. 204). Fourth, superheroes have become role models for us. Fifth, they tell beautiful stories in which we are willing to escape (p. 205). Sixth, they change our life. Seventh, they have a soteriological role in our life, saving us from boredom and filling our spare time (pp. 206-207). Eighth, they give us inner pace, helping us feel comfortable with uneasy situations in our life (p. 208). Ninth, we love them due to a world psychosis, mainly the American one, related to alien sightings and encounters. Tenth, they satisfy secret nostalgia unavailable in the modern world (p. 209).

To conclude, the recommendation reviewed above is quintessential for anyone interested in the topic due to the scholarly references used in the analyses of the films, an incentive to further studies. The volume places itself in the landscape of Romanian sociology books that deal with sociological, anthropological, and psychological explanations of consumer culture. To be more specific, the author's cultural endeavor is to decipher the myths, symbols, and archetypes camouflaged in *Marvel* superhero movies. The book targets specialists (sociologists of culture, anthropologists of religions, actors, directors, experts in cinematographic art), but also the general educated public. The model of analysis is inspired by the work of Mircea Eliade (disguising the sacred in the profane). As can be seen from the general bibliography, few Romanian authors have followed in books the camouflage of sacred postures in highly successful commercial films.