

The Image that Does Not Represent: Mythological Approach

Original Study

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Abstract: Can an image not signify? This paper explores two cases: self-referential images and mythological images. While Winfred Nöth defends the universality of semiotics against a potential paradox, this paper argues that subjection to semiotic logic can distort the understanding of domains such as myth. Mythological images do not adhere to formal logic and lack distinct signifiers and signified. By studying myth from within, without attempting to interpret it through external frameworks, the unique asemiotic nature of the identity between subject and object is revealed.

Keywords: Image, Self-referential, Myth, Semiotics, Metaphor, Asemiotic

INTRODUCTION

Can an image not signify? Or more broadly, can a sign not signify? Despite the apparent impossibility of such questions, they can be posed in at least two cases. The first case concerns a self-referential image, and the second concerns an image within the framework of mythological consciousness. While Winfred Nöth has clearly expressed his views on the self-referential image, the mythological image leaves room for further research.

In *Crisis of Representation*, Winfred Nöth noted that one of the challenges for semiotics is the idea of self-reference: "Is it possible that a sign may not represent anything but itself? Can something that does not stand for something else still be called a sign?" (Nöth 2003, 12). As a specific example, he examined the self-referential photo, which instead of being the indexical sign of a referential object, shows only itself, "it draws attention to nothing but the photo" (Nöth 2007, 98). Among the various types of such photographs that Nöth identifies, the most revealing for this discussion is "self-referential

photos in the photo (mise en abyme)". As an example, he cites a photograph "Kassel is everywhere or: Where am I?": "A giant photo of a street is inserted in the picture of the same street taken from the same point of view" (Nöth 2007, 101). The photograph depicts a group of artists carrying a large photograph of the same street. In this composition, everything except the artists themselves is depicted twice, "exemplifying genuine iconic self-reference".¹

Analysis of texts (Nöth 2000, 2003, 2007) allows us to quite clearly define the definition of self-reference with which the scholar works: self-reference is a paradoxical concept in semiotics where a sign represents nothing but itself. From a semiotic perspective, the question remains to be answered whether such pictures without a referent can still be considered as signs. Does not the notion of sign require the correlate of a referent, and if so, can semiotics still contribute to the study of such signs without a referent? Is the concept of the nonreferential sign a contradiction in terms (Nöth 2007, 103)?

¹ Perhaps an even more typical example would be a photo of a photo without preserving the mise en abyme effect

For Nöth, the problem of the self-referential image appears to be seemingly within both Peirce's semiotics and the perspective of structural semiology. According to Nöth, inspired by Peirce, a self-referential image remains a sign even if it represents nothing or lacks a referent in the real world. Such a referent, or more precisely, an object for the Peircean sign, can be a concept or an idea:

Even in concrete photographs without any indexical anchors in the 'real' world, the pictures are signs. Their objects are our previous experience of the visual world, of the forms, colors, and textures. (Nöth 2007,103)

On the other hand, among Peirce's categories is the genuine icon, which "is nothing but the idea of a genuinely self-referential sign. It is a sign 'by virtue of a character which it possesses in itself' without drawing 'any distinction between itself and the object' (CP 5.73–74). The genuinely iconic sign thus represents only itself and is hence completely self-referential" (Nöth 2003, 14). However, it remains a sign even if it refers only to itself because "it has the potential of producing an effect in a process of semiosis. Producing this effect, the phenomenon functions as a sign. Hence, even in self-reference, semiosis is possible" (Nöth 2003, 14).

From the standpoint of semiology, the situation is even simpler— the self-referential image simply is not a sign by definition. Since in the structuralist tradition a sign can exist only in relation to other signs, it cannot represent anything that is nonsemiotic:

Since the world beyond the signs, according to Saussure, is a mere nebula, signs can only be signs in opposition to other signs, and representation is not the representation of the world, but the representation of a difference between signs. (Nöth, 2003, 13)

Both explanations seem to solve the problem. However, this argument implies that self-reference or self-reflexivity does not threaten either semiotics or semiology simply because they do not exist. In the structuralist tradition, this is because they are not signs by definition (although structuralism is not limited to Saussure's definition of a sign). In Peircean terms, a self-referential sign is not self-referential because it actually means something else (an idea or thought) or has not yet realized its potential to stand for something else.

Such a denial of a sign's ability to represent anything but itself can be seen as a symptom of a realist approach in semiotics, where any phenomenon develops according to the logic of semiosis. However, does this approach

not impoverish semiotics, which is capable of to study the world of signs, which represent something else and signs that represent nothing but themselves? In particular, the exclusion of the latter makes it impossible to study myths in a sense of semiotics without losing the essence of the mythological image which is self-referential. The key properties of mythological images are that they:

- do not obey formal logic, making them difficult to align with Peirce's logical categories or to subordinate to the laws of logic-as-semeiotic². If we consider the mythological image in the system of deductive logic of Peircean semiotics, it will turn out that we are already considering something else, but not myth.
- relate to each other as identities (or as tautologies), lacking both signifier and signified. From the mythological point of view, the image does not represent something else, but is it (for example, the image of a deity does not symbolise the deity, but is it). Self-reference here manifests itself in the fact that the image is as if turned to itself, is fixated on itself, is its own self.

Not every mythological theory attributes these two properties to images. Most of them are interpretative, attempting to explain „what a myth means“, while only a few marginal attempts to examine myth “from within”. Below, I will present both types of theories and then focus more specifically on the second type, where mythological objects exist, in the language of founders of the Tartu-Moscow school Juri Lotman and Boris Uspensky, in *asemiotic* relationships.³

MYTH INTERPRETED

Theories of myth research can be conventionally divided into two groups. The first and largest group encompasses attempts to interpret what myth *means*. This includes the allegorical and euhemerical interpretations of antiquity (and later in the Renaissance), as well as the “natural” viewpoint of researchers from the second half of the 19th century, who saw meteorological (thunderstorm) phenomena as the basis of myths.⁴ This group also includes researchers of the anthropological school. For example, Edward Tylor believed that ancient man, seeking explanations for incomprehensible phenomena such as dreams, illnesses, and death, built mythology in a purely rational logical way. According to Tylor, the ancients thought exactly like the English of the nineteenth century, but they had less knowledge, and so myth-making is a kind of primitive science, created by the same mind, but under different conditions. In turn, James George Fraser, a descendant of the Tylor school,

² “Logic, in its general sense, is, as I believe I have shown, only another name for *semiotic* (σημειωτική), the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs” (Peirce, CP 2.227, c.1897, cit. in Bellucci, and Pietarinen, <https://iep.utm.edu/peir-log/>), cf. Bellucci. (2014). “Logic, considered as Semeiotic”: On Peirce's Philosophy of Logic. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 50(4), 523. doi:10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.50.4.523

³ More about asemiotic aspect could be found in Sabitov, D. (2023). What does it mean to be asemiotic?. *Estudos Semióticos*, 19(3), 209-224. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1980-4016.esse.2023.210074>

⁴ A historical overview of mythological theories can be found in *The Poetics of Myth* (Melitinsky 2000 [1976])

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contrasted Tylor's animism with magic, considering it to be the main motive force – magic required rituals. Both Tylor and Fraser saw myth as a kind of primitive science. Robert Segal notes that where Tylor's myth could be compared to an ancient *scientific theory* that attempts to *explain* phenomena, for Fraser it is more akin to *applied science*, seeking “effect events” (Segal 2004, 24).

The next step in the study of myth was made by Bronislaw Malinowski, who, unlike the armchair scientists who preceded him, used the method of participant observation. As a result of his work, a functionalist approach to myth was formulated. “Myth codifies thought, reinforces mores, defines precise rules of behaviour, sanctions rituals, and rationalizes and justifies the social order” (Meletinskij 1998, 25). Malinowski's theory suggests that “myths do not have intrinsic meaning; their meaning is given by their home context of situation. Myths are thus not primarily texts, or isolated pieces of literature; they are texts merged with contexts” (Strenski 2014, XI).

Xander Kirke would argue that “the explanatory and functional aspects of myths remain present to varying degrees in the works of most other authors on myth” (Kirke 2019, 60). Interpretations of what myth *means* can take many forms—they can be interpreted as manifestations of the unconscious (Sigmund Freud 1913), or as manifestations of archetypes (Carl Jung 1959, Mircea Eliade 1942, Joseph Campbell 1968), or ideology (Roland Barthes 1957). The myth can be interpreted as a form of philosophy of ancient man (Paul Radin 1927) etc.

In this approach, interpretation becomes more important than the myth itself. One of the key reasons myth becomes secondary material, and why authors seek to unravel mythological events as if they were symbols or signs, is that these authors “ignore the essence of the myth,” that “myth is taken as reality” (Stebliin-Kamenskij 1982 [1976], 21). In other words, “people who study myths do not believe in them themselves”:

They cannot help regarding them as invention. In so doing, they substitute their own modern consciousness for the consciousness of the myth-makers, for whom myth is reality. Scholars cannot deal with living myth, but only with what was once myth and now for the modern mind has become quite the reverse, an invention perceived as such and capable of “meaning” something. (Stebliin-Kamenskij 1982 [1976], 22)

The less popular type of theories consider myth to be self-sufficient and studies it as if from within. This approach is central to this publication.

MYTH EXAMINED FROM WITHIN

Stebliin-Kamenskij argues that the attempt to see myth as truth was first made by the Romantics. The myth was recognized as the truth, and for those among whom the myths existed, they were reality. However, this discovery

was superimposed on the features of Romanticism itself, in which myths were true to the extent that they were poetry. This, in turn, led back to a pre-romantic state of affairs when myths began to be treated as poetic images that needed to be deciphered. Among the Romantics, the most consistent was Schelling, who developed his “grand but utterly fantastic aim of tracing all myths to a single origin in monotheism” (Stebliin-Kamenskij 1982 [1976], 24). Rejecting the conception of mythology as poetic or philosophical fiction, he insisted on the study of myth “from within, as a world governed by its inner laws” (Stebliin-Kamenskij 1982 [1976], 24).

This schematic division of mythological theories into those that consider myth “from the outside” and those that try to see the myth from within seems to be the most fundamental for understanding the specific asemiotic nature of the mythological image. Studying myth from within, the question “What does myth mean?” is replaced by the question “How does myth *function*?”. At the same time, one should be aware of the weakness of such an approach, as the myth becomes as if impenetrable; myth turns out to be a “self-contained world in itself” (Montagu 1949, 368). Thus it is impossible to *investigate* the myth really from within, since the myth's *observer* is a part of it, and is also close to this *box*. Any outward observation of the signs exhibited by the mythological text can also only be an interpretation of the non-mythological consciousness that reads its perception into the myth. These limitations need to be taken into account.

Whatever the case, a number of researchers have attempted to study the myth from within. This should include the theory of Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939)⁵, who probably first attempted to examine myth from within. His approach differed significantly from that of his predecessors. Unlike them, he analysed ethnographic material without relying on any specific scientific paradigm, such as evolutionism or sociologism. Instead, he focused on what the material itself revealed. He observed that any attempt to understand the meaning of myths is generally doomed to failure because researchers cannot perceive what the original bearers see in the myth. Scholars interpret myths through the translation of grammar and words, which differs fundamentally from the primitive mystic realities expressed in myths. As Lévy-Bruhl noted, “especially those expressive of group-ideas, portrayed in myths, are to the primitive mystic realities, each of which determines a *champ de force*” (Lévy-Bruhl 1966 [1910], 331). Researchers are primarily interested in the plot, the sequence of episodes, and the adventures of the hero, and they try to interpret these elements first, “overlooking the fact that the prelogical, mystic mentality is oriented differently from our own” (Lévy-Bruhl 1966 [1910], 331). His conclusions and approach, in turn, greatly influenced Ernst Cassirer, and subsequently, both authors impacted the original theory of Olga Freidenberg. Finally, it is important to mention the theory of myth by Lotman

⁵ The scholar was criticised by his contemporaries, yet there has been a recent rethinking of his legacy. Read more at Mousalimas (1990), Schmaus (1996), Velmezova and Vlasiner (2012), Dawes (2014), Lacková (2023)

and Uspensky, who demonstrated how the mythological mode of perception has persisted from ancient times to the present day.

IDENTITY OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT

The concreteness of thinking, that is, the inability to separate the subject from the object, is a key characteristic of myth, which essentially shifts the topic of self-representation into another dimension. In myth, things, words, sounds, actions, and images can all be identical to one another. While an external observer perceives them as different objects, for someone living within the myth, they are tautological/identical to each other, they are the same.

Understanding this is not always possible, and this poses a certain difficulty in the study of myth. For instance, Cassirer, responding to the paradox of why myth, which tends towards animation and sensuality, is so directed "toward what is most unreal and lifeless, that the shadow realm of words, images, and signs" (Cassirer 1955[1925], 23), asserts that the formulation of the question is inherently flawed. Such a question can only be posed by a bearer of non-mythological consciousness, one who seeks separation in that aspect of spiritual life which precedes this distinction and remains indifferent to it:

The mythical world is concrete not because it has to do with sensuous, objective contents, not because it excludes and repels all merely abstract factors – all that is merely signification and sign; it is concrete because in it the two factors, thing and signification, are undifferentiated, because they merge, grow together, condescend in an immediate unity (Cassirer 1955 [1925], 24).

Cassirer's notion of the concreteness of thinking likely originates from the theory of so-called "primitive" thinking by Lévy-Bruhl, who identified a qualitative difference in the way ancient people and his contemporaries thought. Since it differed from formal logic, he called this type of thinking pre-logical; pre-logical thinking is indifferent to the rule of non-contradiction. Such indifference allows multinumeration, consubstantiality, and multilocation: "In other words, it allowed something to be both singular and plural, both itself and something else, both here and elsewhere at the same time" (Mousalimas 1990, 38). What allows not seeing a problem in the fact that a leader is both a man and a parrot, or that a sorcerer can be a crocodile at the same time, is the law of participation. Broadly speaking, everything surrounding a person is interconnected, and these networks exist in collective representations:

Collective representations are not [...] analysed and then arranged in a logical sequence by it. They are always bound up with preperceptions, preconceptions, preconceptions, and we might almost say with prejudgments (Lévy-Bruhl 1966 [1910], 90-91).

Importantly, these participations are neither consciously recognized nor analysed—they are "directly felt" (Lévy-Bruhl 1966 [1910], 330). In this direct experience, it becomes possible that "persons and things in primitive thought form part of one another to the point even of identity" (Somersan 1981, 119). This ability to experience different objects as one, applies equally simply to relations with mythical ancestors, as well as "with a certain animal or vegetable species, with natural phenomena like the wind or the rain" (Lévy-Bruhl 1966 [1910], 333).

BEFORE ABSTRACT CONCEPTS

The mythological concreteness was even more articulated in the works of Soviet scholar Olga Freidenberg (1890-1955) who was the first woman to receive a Doctor of Science degree in Classical Philology.⁶ Studying ancient literature, she saw in it all the same pattern - the indistinguishability of subject and object. This allows her to not only confirm the concreteness of myth but also to develop Lévy-Bruhl's hypothesis on the existence of specific mythological thinking.⁷ This thinking is constructed on perceiving the surrounding world in images, foreign to formal-logical thinking that operates with concepts because abstract concepts did not exist in myth.⁸ This is one of Freidenberg's maxims, which sounds rather radical:

Therefore we need a definite answer to this basic question. Yes, there was a time when there were no concepts. Yes, concepts had their moment of origin. They had and have a long and very complicated history. The concept is a historical category like everything created by thought. (Freidenberg 1996 [1954], 21)

From her perspective, ancient Greek literature reflects that historical moment when the mythological image transitions into the abstract concept: "Classical literature is still in the process of becoming. Its course is determined by the relation between old image-thought and new conceptual thought" (Freidenberg 1996 [1954], 24). This transition is reflected in the ancient metaphor. Freidenberg's research showed that the ancient Greek metaphor is not free in its construction and differs fundamentally from modern artistic metaphor. She asserts

⁶ Her academic career was fraught with difficulties, and after her death, her name was largely forgotten for over 20 years. It was only in 1973, thanks to Yuri Lotman, that her work was reintroduced to the academic community through the publication of several of her works in the Tartu journal *Semeiotike* (Trudy po znakovym sistemam) (Galerkina 1994, 424).

⁷ Here she defends his term "prelogical": "But let us leave the term "prelogical" thought alone—we have shown more than once the arbitrary character of this term, which does not at all mean thinking without logic (if it were "pre-formal-logical" everything would be all right)". (Freidenberg 1954, pp. 20-21)

⁸ On the absence of words with an abstract meaning in the language of the Icelandic „Edda“, see Steblin-Kamenskij (1963, pp. 181–213)

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that an ancient Greek author could not create a metaphor where the connection between the vehicle and its tenor (the subject of the metaphor) was arbitrary: "Modern metaphor can be created by transferring a feature from any phenomenon onto any other" (Freidenberg 1996 [1954], 32). For example, a modern author might use the metaphor "iron will". However, such a metaphor would be impossible for a Greek author because, for an ancient metaphor to appear, the object and subject of the metaphor would have to be identical in the mythological image. An example given by Freidenberg is the metaphor from the Iliad "iron sky":

Homer could say 'iron sky' 'iron heart' because the sky, man, and man's heart were represented in myth as iron⁹. Later one synonym 'iron heart' takes on in conceptual thinking the figurative meaning of 'unbending' 'stern' heart; but 'iron sky' remains a mythological image in its direct literal meaning 'sky of iron' and in archaic pre-conceptual epic it does not become a metaphor. (Freidenberg 1996 [1954], 32)

In other words, an ancient author could create an abstract metaphor only from components that previously represented identity in myth: "Behind ancient transfer of meaning lay the identity of two semantics, an identity which derived from thinking in mythological images" (Freidenberg 1996 [1954], 33). Such a metaphor arises naturally as a form of the image in the function of concept—in the torn identity of concrete image "one of them continued to be concrete, the other became its own transposition to concept" (Freidenberg 1996 [1954], 32). Thus, "the classical metaphor is an image in two senses: mythological (in form) and conceptual (in content)" (Freidenberg 1996 [1954], 43). Another consequence of breaking the identity is the emergence of the opposition between *authentic* and *illusory*; the development of abstract concepts was part of the emergence of a realistic worldview, where mythology turns into folklore.

MYTHOLOGICAL PRE-METAPHOR

It has already been stated that the ancient metaphor originated from the mythological image, but what a mythological image is has not yet been explained. It is important to note that this is the most vulnerable part of her theory because, unlike Lévy-Bruhl, Tylor, and others, Freidenberg does not attempt to reconstruct the perceptions of contemporary Tasmanians, presenting them as authentic sensations of primitive man. Her archaeology reaches deep into the centuries to *actual*

primitive people who had recently emerged from the animal world.

The methodological vulnerability of her hypothesis lies in its foundation on the logic of common sense. An example of this reasoning is: the more primitive a society is, the more dependent it is on nature, and therefore the primitive man primarily sees and notices the external nature, behind which he does not see his individuality; individuality cannot exist because ancient man does not distinguish himself from nature. Naturally, this hypothesis is untestable; we cannot know how the primitive man experienced the world. However, another approach to the reconstruction of truly primitive thinking is probably impossible. Below, it will be shown in more detail how Freidenberg conducts a retrospective analysis of the history of human cognition.

INITIAL IMAGE

Thus, not noticing nature, the primitive hunter notices only what he directly deals with, that is, the beast. Therefore, the entire external nature for him is merged with the beast he hunts, eats, and embodies himself. In other words, he does not see the external nature as we do—he perceives nature through the "prism of the beast". He sees the sky, air, earth, celestial bodies, and water as forms of the beast. Similarly, not seeing his separateness, the ancient man sees himself through the "prism of the beast".¹⁰ For the primitive hunter, the beast is a *totem*. It should be noted that Freidenberg attributes her own meaning to the word *totem*¹¹, so further in the text, where the word 'totem' is used, it should be understood as Freidenberg conceived it. Nina Braginskaya, speaking about Freidenberg's totem, writes: "Totem/non-totem" is an expression of Freidenberg's metalanguage for the most general level of describing this anti-significant duality as a generative model of all semantic diversity" (Braginskaya 2018, 84).

To simplify greatly, due to the concreteness of mythological thinking, a person does not distinguish himself from external nature, particularly from the beast with which he deals. Similarly indistinguishable from nature, the entire tribe was a totem. Hunger was experienced as the absence of the totem, while satiety, on the contrary, was the fullness of the totem with the totem. On the hunt, the tribe-totem killed the beast-totem. The head of the tribe, indistinguishable from the tribe-totem, as a multiplicity-unity eater, tore the body of the beast-totem into parts, which the tribe-totem subsequently ate, filling themselves with the totem.

⁹ It should not be assumed that in myth, the presence of a common image among certain images makes them identical. The identity of „iron sky“ and „iron heart“ does not create a third identity from „sky“ and „heart.“

¹⁰ "Myth-making consciousness does not recognize the human; what we take here as a person is the entire visible nature plus everything surrounding it, including objects. We must forget the human appearance and human properties because none of this exists here" (Freidenberg 1943, 26)

¹¹ Totemism - system of belief in which humans are said to have kinship or a mystical relationship with a spirit-being, such as an animal or plant. The entity, or totem, is thought to interact with a given kin group or an individual and to serve as their emblem or symbol. (Haekel, J.. „totemism.“ Encyclopedia Britannica, September 8, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/totemism-religion>.)

This could be schematically described as how, according to Freidenberg, the concreteness of thinking was realized in primitive man. Studying ancient literature and the life of ancient Greece, she finds that all the images expressed in the mythological metaphor repeatedly replicate the same image in different ways: the totem kills, tears apart, and eats the totem, thereby resurrecting it. This image is then expressed in the most diverse mythological metaphors, which remain semantically equal to each other. "The image does not designate a point. It marches in place because it knows neither movement nor forward motion, because it is in a complex of identities" (Freidenberg 1954, 196). Later, with the decline of primitive thinking, mythological metaphors become figurative transfers, and even later, poetic tropes. But here, in primitive thinking, metaphors are equal variants of the image, equal to each other and the image. Metaphors of the mythical image are refined, narrowed images" (Freidenberg 1998 [1943], 25). In *Poetics of Plot and Genre* (1936), Freidenberg thoroughly examines metaphorical tautologies and how they migrated from myth to the modern world, retaining their form but losing their original semantics.

NARROWING OF THE IMAGE: MYTHOLOGICAL TAUTOLOGY

The reconstruction of semantic tautology in mythological metaphors, which she conducts both in *Poetics of Plot and Genre* and *Image and Concept*, might seem peculiar or even absurd to us: the sun is a beast moving across the sky, the tribe-beast replicates this movement in its hunt for the beast; the eating of the beast is connected with the position of the sun; the sun turns out to be a ship sailing through the cosmos, a beast-ship, reflected in the shape of ships whose prows depict a beast or a woman, which are essentially the same; the Argo is such a woman-totem-beast-ship sailing through the cosmos; a ship is a barrel, a woman's womb, a grave; a ship is an ark, a temple housing the deity,¹² the former totem; ritual circular movements, wearing wreaths and bracelets—all these are the sun, the beast, the totem.

However, in the same works, she points out similar images in Christianity, which, in light of tradition and partial purification from mythological concreteness, do not seem as absurd. For example, if we restore the mythological concreteness to the Eucharist, it turns out that the priest, being Christ, breaks Christ's body, eats part of it himself, and distributes the other parts, which constitutes a sacrifice of God to Himself; this takes place in the church, which is the body of God, in the presence of believers, who are also the body of Christ, eating and

drinking the body and blood of Christ, thereby sacrificing themselves to God.¹³ Considering this image mythologically, one would say there is no metaphor here, as there is no transfer of meaning from one object to another. Outside myth, there is a place for metaphor, in which there is a discrepancy between the formal side of the image and its meaning: "for example, when "wine is my blood" will no longer mean the literal identity of blood and wine, as it did in myth" (Freidenberg 1998 [1943], 28).

How is the tautology of such different forms of mythological metaphors ensured? This apparent contradiction is resolved in the same way—through the declared concreteness of mythological thinking, in which *words*, *things*, and *actions* are identical to each other. Freidenberg, anticipating Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage, writes that the primitive man, "perceiving (external objects—ed.), reproduces them anew, involuntarily recombining their individual elements, altering one feature at the expense of another, shifting scales, linking them with new connections, giving them new content" (Freidenberg 1998 [1943], 26). And further:

In the totemistic worldview, people, nature, and things are one indivisible whole. I constantly repeat this because it is most difficult for us to imagine that some hero, Theseus or Achilles, is not a human at all, that the river, the sun, or the sky is not nature; they are neither the sun, nor the sky, nor the river, that a table is not a thing. In the totemistic worldview, a table is the sky, the sun, the underworld, a living and dead creature, a totem. (Freidenberg 1998 [1943], 53)

Thus, Freidenberg shows how, due to the concreteness of thinking, which sees things, words, and actions as identical, the primitive man conveys the same image of the totem in new forms; words, things, and actions are recombined in different combinations not chaotically, but according to the laws of myth. Ultimately, the objectively observable external world, through numerous steps of displacement and recombination, transforms into a "second independent objective existence, which henceforth begins to contradictorily live alongside unperceived reality" (Freidenberg 1998 [1943], 26).

THE MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGE IN OUR DAYS

But is mythological consciousness a thing of the past, and is the fusion of object and subject a thing of the past? Olga Freidenberg would rather answer that yes – just the form of the myth has passed into modernity, and the mythological image has been lost.

But Juri Lotman and Boris Uspensky believe otherwise. In their joint article *Name - Culture - Myth* they argue

¹² See Ciordia, José M. „Sleeping Ships and Their War Anchors: The Naval Origin of Greek Architecture and Sculpture.” SSRN Electronic Journal, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3879018>

¹³ Nicholas Thompson (2004, 161) writes of Cardinal Johann Gropper's view: „Thus the Eucharist united Christ with the faithful: not only spiritually but also bodily, so that we are not only joined together in the Spirit, but are also members of his body and of his flesh and of his bones... .. through Baptism, Confirmation, Penance and the Eucharist the faithful were, 'baked into Christ's bread.' Yet the faithful who participated in the sacrament were joined not only with others who participated in the sacrament simultaneously, but with the whole body of Christ living and dead"

that in modern natural language there is a special layer of other language that does not belong to natural language. This is the language of proper names. From their point of view, the language of proper names is a mythological language that remained from mythological times into modernity. In terms of the visual domain, "portrait represents a parallel [...] to the proper name" (Lotman, Uspensky 2009 [1973], 223). In what does the peculiarly mythological character of proper names manifest itself as? Non-mythological language is characterised by descriptiveness, whereas mythological language is characterised by identification. As example of non-mythological language, Lotman and Uspensky use the expression "The world is matter" in which:

[...] words can only capture one detail of a complex reality, leaving other possibilities open for discovery. Describing something means finding the most appropriate sets of synonyms, yet keeping in mind that none of them can be exactly equivalent to each other or provide an exhaustive representation of reality. (Gussago 2013, 75)

The second expression "The world is a horse" (Lotman, Uspensky 2009 [1973], 211) is extracted from the Hindu teachings of The Upanishads and is mythological. There is no translation of one concept through another, as in the first example, there is identification. The authors show that even the same copula 'is' has a different function. In the instance "The world is matter", 'is' indicates correlation; in the second "The world is a horse", 'is' indicates identification and recognition. In a mythological text, translation is impossible because all objects belong to the same language, thus both meta-language and metaphor are impossible in myth.

In the words of Uspensky and Lotman, the words 'world' and 'horse' are isomorphic. It is important to stress that the world and the horse are not only isomorphic to each other, and belong to the same language, but are also singular. Mythological thinking cannot contain a synonymic series because "synonymy assumes the presence for one and the same object of several interchangeable appellations and, consequently, a relative freedom in their usage" (Lotman, Uspensky 2009 [1973], 224). This kind of singularity of objects and their isomorphism allows the authors to conclude that they all function as names and that the language of myth is a "language of proper names" (Lotman, Uspensky 2009 [1973], 234).

This identification of name and what is named in turn determines the notion of the unconventional nature of proper names, of their ontological essence. Hence mythological consciousness can be interpreted from the standpoint of the development of semiosis as asemiotic. (Lotman, Uspensky 2009 [1973], 215)

Since Lotman and Uspensky perceive portraits as equivalents of proper names in the visual sphere,¹⁴ everything said about proper names applies to them as well. Lotman and Uspensky note that mythological layers can "arise spontaneously in the individual and social consciousness" (Lotman, Uspensky 2009 [1973], 221), indicating that mythologism is a current, not an obsolete phenomenon. In the context of myth, an image does not signify; it is what is depicted. From the perspective of myth, this is essentially the only possible understanding (or rather, experience) of the image. This understanding is evident in ancient Egyptian culture, where "living" images form the cultural foundation. The theoretical distinction between an image and what it represents is a much younger concept. In European culture, this distinction was thoroughly examined during the conflict between Iconoclasts and Iconophiles. The Iconoclasts held a semiotic position, expressed by the emperor and iconoclast Constantine V: "Every image is a copy of an original... In order to be a true image, it has to be consubstantial with what is depicted... so that the whole be safeguarded; otherwise it is not an image" (Schönborn 1994, 157).

The veneration and destruction of images remain integral to human culture. In *What is Iconoclasm? Or is there a world beyond the image wars?*, Bruno Latour notes how, after the September 11 attacks in the USA, the intellectual, critical "image destruction worship" suddenly shifted to a new intensity of clinging to our idols, fetishes, and "factishes" (2001, 38). This shift, among other things, illustrates Latour's thesis that "we have never been modern" (Latour 2001, 38). Latour's critique highlights that people have ceased to understand (or never understood) that images are "man-made," and that they are only mediators, the sole means to access God, Nature, Truth, and Science, which are, in fact, human creations. This critique stems from an intellectual, semiotic analysis—it *describes* but seems not to *explain* why images have such a powerful impact, while remembrance of myth in the modern world offers a new perspective.

CONCLUSION

Despite its historical novelty, the semiotic approach has taken a universalist and dominant position in the study of the universe, including myth. However, this approach may impoverish the study of myth as a cultural artifact of the past and as a living part of the present. The resolution of the paradox of self-reflexivity proposed by Nöth poorly explains instances where images, words, names, actions, and objects are perceived as a single entity/signify each other/merge/are one and the same. What Lotman and Uspensky called the manifestation of the "mythological situation or, in other words, the manifestation of myth in contemporary individual and social consciousness, can be easily broken down into semiotic components, but in

¹⁴ „If the portrait represents a parallel in painting to the proper name, then the repainting of the portrait is an adequate parallel to the act of renaming" (Lotman, Uspensky 2009 [1973], 223)

doing so, something essential is lost. Thus, instead of studying what myth is, we study what myth seems to be. In particular, one can misjudge the actions of people driven by mythological consciousness by trying to analyse them with semiotic tools.

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