

Shaping our worlds by embracing ourselves – how the whole self is involved in shaping our spiritual landscapes and mythologies

Creative project review

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It was from Jeffrey J. Kripal and the mythology of superheroes that I found my initial spark of inspiration for this project. In mythology, the role of the hero

is about transition, about change, about movement from one state to another...the hero is called upon to engage with...chaos and destruction directly, to refocus the creative energies through a particular vision and so help put things back together again, hopefully in a new and more functional form...This is often true in secular contexts as well. And so, in modern American superhero mythologies, for example, we see these figures appearing... (Kripal et al.,2014, p.124)

The creative project offered me a chance to enter the academic realm with a topic which sparks joy and enthusiasm in my heart (comic books) but also allowed me to explore some themes which interest me on an intellectual level – myths, and how myth is involved in shaping the landscape of belief, on a personal and cultural level. Through my interest in comic books the role of the hero is especially interesting for me, because it is in the struggles, adventures, victories and realisations of the hero that the morals and rules of a society are transmitted. After all, the hero is held up to society as a paragon of virtue and morality, the hero is the standard against which all others are measured. Furthermore, the idea that superheroes and their stories could be interpreted in the secular sense as new mythologies for our modern era was an exciting discovery, as I had never given much thought to the deeper meanings within the comics and heroes I love so much. However, as I began to formulate a way to explore the hero's journey, I realised that I myself am not a hero, nor am I on a hero's journey. My interest sparked from Kripal's quote was in the role that secular influences play in the creation, adaption, and evolution of the individual's personal and spiritual landscapes, not on superheroes themselves. I was interested in what other aspects of secular life (aside from comic books) can or could have an influence on how individuals shape their own spiritual landscapes and mythologies.

I felt that the work of Bernardo Kastrup in his 2016 book *More than allegory* offered a good place to begin the exploration of the role in which myth plays on the individual and the shaping of one's personal and spiritual landscape. Kastrup writes that-

Myth is a code that each one of us uses, whether we are aware of it or not, to interpret life in the world...Myth is the very thing that allows the events of consensus reality to mean anything to us... Myth is also the very thing that allows the events of life to impact us emotionally...they are a necessary

condition for the images of the world to convey any meaning to us, intellectual or emotional. (Kastrup, 2016, p.18)

Kastrup builds a case for myth being a founding block of conscious and unconscious landscape building, allowing for individuals to engage with events and their surroundings in a way which has tangible meaning on a physical, intellectual, and emotional level. He makes a case for myth holding a greater role in an individual's understanding of their world beyond the mundane, and beyond being simply an explanation for the creation of the physical realm, or an answer to events which occur. Kastrup goes on to state that "One always lives according to a myth, for a continuous interpretation of consensus reality is inherent to the human condition. The question is whether one's chosen myth resonates with one's deepest intuitions or runs counter to them." (Kastrup, 2016, p.20)

It was this quote which I felt linked back to my creative project idea. I felt that the concept of 'chosen myths' and how one goes about consciously or unconsciously choosing them was a topic which deserved greater exploration, as well as being an interesting concept to explore in a creative manner. So, it was with my idea grasped firmly in hand, I was then to tackle my next challenge, as if I was going to creatively represent this idea, I was first going to have to think of a medium to express my work.

When seeking a medium for my creative project, I was in the beginning at a loss. I am not a painter, nor am I a poet or maker of great and beautiful things, and I confess (if I may) to looking at the work of previous students, and listening to the ideas of my peers, with something akin to jealousy and awe. I am not an artist or 'creative' in the accepted and conventional way, but I do consider myself to have a creative streak, in which scissors, glue, glitter, and stickers play their individual parts, and it was in a class exercise that I finally managed to find my medium – collage – a medium which at once combines my artistic 'strengths', while offering a way to cover any mistakes very easily! Once I had decided to use collage as my means of expressing my project, I was then free to continue my research track, and to see if anything had arisen which I wanted to address as I created my project. I was aware that I would need to present my work, and I felt that having some queries to share would help to show how I had moved through the various stages of my work. There were three questions which arose because of the work I had completed up until this point, which not only offered me directional guidance for creating my project, but also offered a framework for my presentation, and for this review. These questions were –

1. What other aspects of secular life (in addition to comic books) can/could have an influence on how we shape our own spiritual landscapes and mythologies?
2. If these secular aspects had an influence on the creation of spiritual landscapes and mythologies, were they a chosen myth or something else? What is the something else? Can/could it be defined?
3. Was it possible to be entirely objective in this exploration, or did it need to come from a personal place?

I felt that addressing question three was the most important place to begin. I needed to be sure of where I was going to be situated theoretically, as that would be the biggest influence

on how my project would manifest itself into being. After some more reading and reflection, I concluded that with this kind of work it was not possible to conduct it in an objective and non-personal manner. This work is inherently personal. If I was going to explore chosen myths in addition to the influences of secular culture on the creation of spiritual and personal landscapes, then I needed to conduct a case study on myself. I needed to be able to identify areas which had influenced the development of my own landscapes, so that I would then be able to identify them outside of a personal context at a later date. Ruth Behar in her book *The Vulnerable Anthropologist* (2001) speaks greatly on the topic of becoming a “vulnerable observer” and is keen to state that the ethnographer (or any researcher for that matter) can never be fully detached from their subjects, that there will always be links in the subject’s lives which will resonate and be reflected in the observer’s life. There will always be some kind of personal involvement which comes across in research methods and written work. However, on the subject of vulnerability she writes that-

Vulnerability doesn’t mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self which is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish. It has to move us beyond that eclipse into inertia...in which we find ourselves identifying so intensely with those whom we are observing that all possibility of reporting is arrested, made inconceivable. **It has to persuade us of the wisdom of not leaving the writing pad blank.** (Behar, 2001, p.14)

The final sentence of the above quote (**in bold**) felt important for this project – I needed to find a way to not leave the page blank. I needed to find a way in which to walk the line between personal and professional, while reaching a conclusion which left me satisfied that I had answered the questions I had set myself. A heuristic approach fitted that criterion, but as I was going to be exploring my own spirituality within my project, I felt that Marie Angelo and her work on Intuitive Inquiry (which has been influenced by heuristic methodology) aligned closer to my aims, as did the work of Rosemarie Anderson on the same subject. In her 2013 paper on Imaginal Inquiry, Angelo writes that-

I did not want to research esotericism from the formal distance of an historian, as psychological pathologies, sociological oddities, anthropological curiosities, theological heresies or literary fictions. Once inside the mysteries, the desire is to serve them, to express them in passionate love, and to follow that inward extroversion which delights in the many worlds and their many inhabitants. I wanted my students to develop an empirical practice which would include but not be limited to the rational world, which would offer genuine experiences and yet fulfil academic criteria. (Angelo, 2013)

While Anderson writes in her paper *Intuitive Inquiry: An epistemology of the heart for scientific inquiry* that she “developed intuitive inquiry as a general qualitative approach that incorporated intuitive and compassionate ways of knowing in selection of a research topic, data analysis, and presentation of findings.” (Anderson, 2004, p.309)

It was with my theoretical and creative frameworks in place that I realised that I needed to move into a more creative mind space to collect my images together and create my collages. I spent some time completing adult colouring pages, creative journaling, and meditating to make a shift away from theory into more practical, and creative thought patterns. In her book *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron leads the reader through a twelve-week series of creative exercises to help them connect to their creative self and the power of their own creativity. Although I did not complete all of the exercises, I did read the book and found one part to be incredibly thought provoking-

The theory doesn't matter as much as the practice itself does. What you are doing is creating pathways in your own consciousness through which the creative forces can operate. Once you agree to clearing these pathways, your creativity emerges. In a sense, your creativity is like your blood. Just as blood is in face of your physical body and nothing you invented, creativity is a fact of your spiritual body and nothing you must invent. (Cameron, 1995, p. viii)

Keeping my spiritual self in mind was something I was unsure of, although I was going to moving into a personal space for this work, I was still unsure as to how much of my secular and spiritual selves that I wanted to put into the realm of my academic self. This dilemma was to become more involved in my project than I anticipated, and it was only as I reached the conclusion of my third collage that this reached a place which I could no longer ignore it. However, at this point in my project it is not important.

With my methodology firmly in place alongside my creative method and mindset, I began to approach my first and second questions, considering how I was going to represent them and work to a conclusion which was represented via my work. I first began to consider aspects of secular life outside of comic books which had had an influence on my own personal landscape and mythologies, in addition to my chosen myths. I identified two areas which I felt were particularly influential on me – literature and music. The more I thought on them, the more I realised just how much of myself has been influenced by the things I have read and listened to. Since childhood I have been a prolific reader, especially in the fiction genres of horror and fantasy, as well as a broad selection of nonfiction subjects ranging from history and religion, to conservation and culture. It was proving to become difficult to identify any short list of books which had had a real influence on my life, because there simply are too many. At this time, we had a seminar presenting our initial ideas for our creative projects to our cohort and a solution to this dilemma presented itself to me, as one of my fellow students was planning to undertake a similar personal study on books which had had an influence on themselves. Music seemed to be the most logical choice to move forward with, offering itself to be a perfect companion, for when I think of books which have influenced me in some way, they are always accompanied by the memory of a song which links with them.

Music has always been a large part of my life. I come from a family which was always listening to music, I was encouraged to play instruments in my childhood, at school I was involved in choir practice from the ages of 9-16. I may not be a brilliant musician, but I

enjoyed myself and felt that a large part of my identity could be explained by individual songs, as well as whole genres and musical styles. Musically I enjoy all types of music, but there are two genres which have had a massive influence on me, namely country, and rock and metal music. They are at opposite ends of the musical line from one another, country being located closer to folk and traditional music, while rock and metal are located to a point closer to ‘noise’ as my father has been known to tell me. However, on a lyrical and emotive level, I feel that both have been maligned somewhat by popular culture, which has missed the deeper meanings and implications of both genres; for example, a lot of the ‘heavier’ metal albums which come out of Scandinavia and Northern Europe, have lyrics which are often influenced by mythology and folklore, with some artists working entirely within a mythological context. One such example can be found in the lyrics of British band Dragonforce, who have a song retelling the



Image 1

Sumerian flood myth from the perspectives of the hero Ziusudra and the god Enlil, entitled *The edge of the world*.¹ Another example can be found in the work of Swedish band Twilight Force, whose entire catalogue of work is influenced by mythology and fantasy, especially draconic and Nordic folklore. Country music tends to deal more with emotional and political issues, with the singers using their fame as a platform to address these issues. Johnny Cash used his music to draw attention to the flaws in the American prison system- his song *Folsom Prison Blues* was written after watching a film about the prison while he was in the military, while Willie Nelson is a campaigner for the decriminalisation of marijuana. Dolly Parton uses her lyrics to highlight the poverty she grew up in, as well as funding a charity which provides children with books to ensure they have access to reading material as they grow up. It is safe to say that both genres of music have had an influence on my personal and spiritual landscape, in a secular and spiritual sense.

When I began my collages, I was listening to music, and each one had a song which inspired it. Collage number 1- ‘Personal’ (see image 1) was created while listening to Johnny Cash’s *Walk the line*.² I didn’t realise the significance of the lyrics until after I had formed the initial layout for the piece. I had planned to represent different aspects (as I see them) of my



personal self, outside of my academic interests. I wanted to show how my many secular interests have shaped my personal worldview, in addition to giving a representation of things I enjoy. It was only after I looked at the finished piece that I realised how appropriate the lyrics are to my personality – “I keep a close watch on this heart of mine, I keep my eyes

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9DAjW5IVs8> – this is a link to the audio of the song. Alternatively, please refer to appendix 1 for the full lyrics.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHF9itPLUo4>

wide open all the time, I keep the ends out for the tie that binds, because you're mine, I walk the line.” (Cash,1956)

Collage number 2 – ‘Spiritual’ (see image 2) was created while listening to music inspired by my spiritual path and was the collage I was most apprehensive about representing in my project. I am a practicing Pagan, and Priestess of Avalon, having trained with the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury, and I was unsure as to how ‘outing’ myself in an academic arena would be received and if it would be detrimental to any future endeavours. However, in the spirit of staying true to my project and methodological approach, I realised I had to make the step to include my personal spiritual beliefs in an authentic manner, if I was to open any future dialogues about influences on personal and spiritual landscapes, in addition to being open to sharing the ‘chosen myths’ I live by. As I mentioned earlier, by the point I had reached my third collage (‘Crisis Point’ see image 3), I was having real personal issues with my project, culminating in problems which had been caused by trying to separate myself into separate entities as opposed to trying to work with myself as a whole being.

On a non-emotional level, I feel that my third collage is a melodramatic representation of just how I was feeling in that moment, but with regards to my project, it was certainly a point which needed to be represented as it was a transitional moment in my thinking. I had been so engrossed on separating secular influences into tidy compartments that I had forgotten that when dealing with concepts such as psyche, spirituality and personal landscapes, one can rarely see



perfect outlines of where one subject ends and another begins. It was an illuminating moment for me and changed my thinking on my entire project. Collage 4- ‘Unification’ (See image 4) is a conclusion to the project which simply showed a visual collation of the conclusions I had drawn from my project. There were no more illuminating discoveries, only a sense of satisfaction and achievement in which I had shown that there were, in relation to my own personal and spiritual landscapes, secular influences (especially musical ones) which had a shaping effect on my own development. If my first question (regarding secular influences which could have an influence on the creation of personal and spiritual landscapes) had been answered with the creation of these collages, then my second question (If these secular aspects had an influence on the creation of spiritual landscapes and mythologies, were they a chosen myth or something else? What is the something else? Can/could it be defined?) was to be answered in my reflections on the project, from my presentation to my cohort, and to research which occurred to me after I had finished.

I concluded that the music which has had an influence on my own landscape were comprised of unconsciously chosen myths originating in a secular aspect of life which had influenced my personal development. However, because these chosen myths were an unconscious choice on my part, I was unable to draw a satisfactory conclusion to the latter part of my second question, because I was not in the position to answer for what is the

something else, or whether it is possible to give a definition of it. Music is a secular influence which is also spiritual at the same time, raising emotions and energies within the self which can move one into a liminal space. In my post-project research, I came across a book by Marcel Cobussen – *Thresholds: Rethinking spirituality through music* in which he says that-

Although prevailing thoughts and intuitions concerning the spiritual might traverse certain experiences while encountering music, music only brings the spiritual into existence. A musical work can offer it the opportunity to appear. But spirituality does not precede the music; it is through music...that we encounter the spiritual, a different spirituality, each time different. A spiritual experience is therefore always mediated and thus never immediate. Spirituality is thus no stable concept, an invariable (and with that a definable) idea; spirituality happens, it happens each time differently and is therefore a constant process of becoming, of (trans)formation. Spirituality is a movement. (Cobussen, 2008, pp.145-6)

Cobussen's book opened some different pathways for me to consider the connection between spirituality and music, as well as between secular influences on personal and spiritual landscapes. There is a connection between these influences that transcends the surface understanding and moves into a place which poses more questions than it answers, and the scope of this essay is not large enough to consider this, however it is something I would like to explore further in the future, alongside one of the questions raised to me after I gave my cohort presentation. The question was on the idea of the differing influences on my personal and spiritual landscapes having more psychological implications, as well as there being an archetypal nature to comic book characters in their moral absolutes and literary roles. On the Jungian nature of comic book characters, academic Ted Friedman writes that-

Comic books' heroes are archetypal, their stories mythic, their metaphysics mystical. Turning to Jung gives comics studies access to an invaluable trove of insight into the mythic dimensions of popular culture. In turn, re-centering media studies around comics studies offers a chance to reintegrate models of archetype and the numinous into contemporary cultural studies...In Jungian terms, superheroes are archetypes: representations of primal psychic forces. In Jungian interpretations of myths and fairy tales, individual characters represent archetypal aspects of a single psyche: the Hero, the Mother, the Shadow, and so on. Likewise, stories of superheroes and super villains speak to us today because their characters represent archetypal elements within each of our psyches. (TedFriedman.com, 2012)

This, alongside feedback from fellow students and tutors regarding Carl Jung's work on archetypes, but viewed through a secular rather than spiritual lens, offered yet another aspect of secular influence on the personal and spiritual which I had not considered during my project. The book recommended to me was *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* by C.G. Jung and R.F.C. Hull, published in 2014. This in addition to my own

further research has not given me any definitive conclusions which I can draw to the questions which I had originally posed myself and I find myself in a position in which a project which I thought would be quite succinct, has taken on a life of its own, in directions I had not anticipated. I find myself reflecting on what the next step will be. Influences on personal and spiritual landscapes, chosen myths, and the deeper psychological implications of both stemming from secular influences do seem to have wider, non-secular ramifications on the spiritual. Although my work focused on music and a creative presentation of my own findings, I do believe that there is a wider scope for more work in the future. I also believe that comic book characters have more to tell us than I anticipated when first reading Kripal's work. What's more, there are other researchers thinking along similar lines which I find exciting and opens more avenues to explore.

I can conclude from my project that secular influences have a large role to play in the formation of personal and spiritual landscapes, in that more than 'just' spirituality or 'just' secular interests help to form the whole self. There is much to be said for the influence of music on allowing for the transmission of more than just sound to the individual. Myth, morals, politics, and wider social issues can be formed via a medium which offers different levels of understanding, dissemination, and unravelling. In my personal instance, as shown by my project, certain songs have had influences over my personal, spiritual, and intellectual journeys. There are songs which can be related to memories or to projects, there are songs which link me to literature which has had an impact on my development. Despite there being quite complicated pieces of music, which have layers of meaning and understanding, sometimes it is the less complicated which offer the best advice, the best compass for moving within a world that is not all that simple to navigate. However, if you take on a mode of being which informs and shapes you in a positive way, then I believe that it cannot be a bad thing. I embarked upon my creative project with the intention of creating a complex but understandable method of exploring the impact of secular culture and life upon the individual's personal and spiritual landscape; however, I completed my project with something much more satisfying and in my opinion much richer – a better understanding of myself and the complexities of my own personality, spirituality, and academic development.

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Appendix

"The Edge Of The World" by Dragonforce – Reaching into infinity, 2017.

Lyrics from <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/dragonforce/theedgeoftheworld.html>

In times of fear and mystery, when the gods had ruled the earth

Sound the bells of victory

The sign of our rebirth

How many died in vain, like waves against the shore

No one hears their whispers anymore

Lost, like the hope in the battle we fought

Through the cold and the rain

Gone, like the years in the shadows and pain, unknown

I've seen through the eyes of the dead

And suffered for them time and again

Granted with immortality

The price for the savior of humanity

Rise from the ashes of mankind
He walks into the fire
With the fate of us all in his hands
And the sadness fills his eyes
The prophecies of Babylon
As he stands at the edge of the world

Long, is the journey, oh, long is the road
As the sun rises over the world
The quest is hard 'til the battle can end
But I have the power in my hands

I've seen through the eyes of the dead
And suffered for them time and again
Granted with immortality
The price of eternity for the Chosen One

Rise from the ashes of mankind
He walks into the fire
With the fate of us all in his hands
And the sadness fills his eyes
The prophecies of Babylon
As he stands at the edge of the world

Honor, the God of Enlil
Silence for the beast is now the prey
Denied a chance for life
I take back that what is mine
Die

Wrath, we rule the skies

May the rain cleanse and wash away
Imperfect, these creations of mine
Corrupted by greed, they shall pay

Chosen, saved from death's embrace

One last chance for man to change his ways

Deified, a place amongst the gods
Saved from mankind's own demise

Rise from the ashes of mankind
He walks into the fire
With the fate of us all in his hands
And the sadness fills his eyes
The prophecies of Babylon
As he stands at the edge of the world

From the ashes of mankind
He walks into the fire
With the fate of us all in his hands
And the sadness fills his eyes
The prophecies of Babylon
As he stands at the edge of the world

At the end of the journey for the savior of the earth
Sound the bells of victory through the signs of our rebirth
As the shadows fade away, we watch the new sun rise
No one fears the darkness anymore