A Rock and a Hard Place: Mythogenesis and Disasters at Sea

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ABSTRACT

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There has recently been an increase in the number and variety of environmental catastrophes. As the field of disaster studies increases in scope and breadth, North American and Western European mass media continue to depict disastrous events by way of dichotomous representations (good/evil; heroic/villainous). To this ends, media technologies play a vital role in the construction of culturally coherent, albeit formulaic, narratives. This thesis unpacks and explores myth generation over time through the work of semiotic cultural theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard. The purpose is to better understand the mechanisms through which mass media produce and perpetuate myths. Mythologies relating to shipwrecks are investigated using two case studies (RMS Titanic and CC Costa Concordia). Ancient mythological narratives are found to have been deployed consistently—and persistently--throughout history. In the concluding section, the capacity of mythologies to produce simulacra or simulated versions of reality is briefly explored.

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To my infinitely patient parents: during the myriad ups and downs of graduate study you marvelled at the fleeting madness of it all while continually emphasising value of perspective. I treasure your wisdom.

To my loving and selfless friends, I am endlessly grateful above all for your time but also for your inspiration and merry spirits. May I endeavour to one day repay that kindness.

For T.

(Even if the whole thing wasn't terribly interesting)

Contents

Introduction

"The reality-fundamentalists equip themselves with a form of magical thinking that confuses message and messenger... it is not we, the messengers of the simulacrum, who have plunged things into this discredit, it is the system itself that has fomented this uncertainty that affects everything today."

(*Jean Baudrillard*, The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact)

Background

The coming years will present unforeseeable challenges to specialists in the disaster community. Consensus within the natural sciences warns of continued changes in/challenges to the relationship between humans and their environment(s) (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2013). Around the time this paper was written, the Earth experienced increases in the length and severity of extreme weather events, alterations in composition and quality of the sea, air and land, and devastations resulting from the social and biological incapacity to absorb the effects of a rapidly changing ecosystem. That being said, those most affected by the havoc wrought by catastrophic events are often those already occupying precarious positions, locally as well as globally (Cook and Bickman 1990; Hultman and Bozmoski 2006; Perry and Green 1982; Sattler, Preston, Kaiser, Olivera, Valdez and Schlueter 2002; Wilbanks and Kates 2010).[1]

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[1] Exceptions to this rule do exist. An example being certain parts of California's Pacific coast, a beacon of affluence situated in a region plagued by fires, earthquakes and mudslides.

Anticipated geophysical changes may increase heat wave intensity and duration, impact local and global food production, reduce water availability. However, exact effects are still unknown. Drought and rising sea levels would exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and confound existing contingency plans. Intersecting, multifarious, and omnipotent threats demand cooperation across the global population and between experts of varying skill sets. Changes in type and intensity of disaster variables will inevitably require a certain degree of adaptation to existing theoretical and practical approaches. The ability to survive dramatic change is the greatest indicator of evolutionary durability. This capability is imperative to ensuring the human species does not become a casualty of declining biodiversity and climatic alterations (National Aeronautics and Space Administration 2013).

Policy makers from a wide range of disciplines (political scientists, sociologists, geographers, and urban planners, to name but a few) will be responsible for the prediction and mitigation of these and other (un)knowable catastrophes. At the time this paper was written, a wide range of specialists from across the globe dedicate themselves to the continued survival of our species, and to the task of minimizing the negative outcomes of humanity's uncertain future.

It is the goal of this paper to increase knowledge of crisis from within the sociological community for two reasons: first, in order to develop and enrich disaster theory; second, most desirably, to facilitate a move beyond the dualist models of human action which dominate popular cultural representations (good/bad; heroic/villainous) toward a deeper understanding of how and why human responses might vary. Simply, I aim to reposition disaster theory within a framework in keeping with the discipline of

Sociology. The purpose being to facilitate a more holistic understanding of the differences between the effects of crisis events on human organization and mobilization, and the construction of crisis' victims and survivors in mass media. In a sense, this first effort would broaden the type and quantity of potential study, by further deepening the linkages between disaster scholarship and communications studies, linguistics, and sociology.

Climate change is increasing the intensity and complexity of marine disasters (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2013; National Aeronautics and Space Administration 2013). While priority had been given to knowing and preparing for all potential risks, recent events are challenging the wait-and-see approach of yesteryear. Whereas, experts previously focused on preparation from a top-down authoritarian position (to learn about and internalize all potential threats; to deploy aid on an after-the-fact basis; and to organize and respond federally to disasters), recent research has shifted toward more integrative and dynamic strategies (knowledge campaigns; individual risk assessments and responsibilisation; a shift in response and responsibility to local and grass-roots organizations) (Basher 2006; Quarantelli 1993).

Indeed, certain elements of this arrangement persist into the twenty-first century: modern metropolises shift focus to private, individualized risk mediation prior to disaster events, yet tax payers foot the bill when planning falls short of desired results (Lawless 2005). In part as a response to these contradictions and evolutions, inadequate preparedness strategies have undergone further scrutiny by disaster professionals as pragmatic alternatives are devised and presented. Professionals in the United States and Canada are beginning to tackle the 'how' and 'why' of disasters yet remain locked within

a particular, 'agent as individual unit' mentality. This is coupled with an incohesive and poorly integrated system of preparedness at the macro level, fostering a piece-meal and ad-hoc implementation procedure (Mileti, Nathe, Gori, Greene and Lemersal 2004; Rodriguez, Quarantelli and Dynes 2007; Scanlon 2007; Wilbanks and Kates 2010).

For example, in 2011, flooding and destruction associated with hurricane Irene shut down entire cities in the north-eastern United States, while this same year, the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan confounded idiopathic planning strategies in one of the world's most populated metropolises (New York Times 2011; Schwartz 2011). The unanticipated effects (or, more accurately, complacency regarding contingency plan adherence and investment) and dynamic nature of sea processes has resulted in a renewed interest in anticipating unforeseeable effects of climate change.

One consequence of these types of events is the resurgence of disaster studies programs and disciplinary specializations in post-secondary institutes worldwide (Scanlon 2007; Tierney 2007). Indeed, greater awareness and interest from within key institutions combined with increased knowledge-sharing might ultimately lead to a wealth of event-based data. There has also been and will continue to be a shift towards deeper theoretical understanding of fundamental questions, negotiating the interconnectedness and non-temporality of events and experiences.

One underlying aim is to contribute to the expansion of theoretical conceptualizations of disaster by challenging distinctions between 'disasters' and 'natural disasters'. I propose that an inherent conflict of 'man against nature' underlies each category, with the exact causative factor residing persistently in human action or inaction. How 'disaster' is constructed reflects social, historical, and cultural values and judgments

(Webb 2007). For instance, one might transpose the shipwreck for the coastal community and each (during tumultuous climatic conditions) might lead to a nature-related disaster event. Meanwhile, it is arguably the human elements that situate the RMS Titanic as a disaster qualitatively distinct from what is colloquially understood as 'natural disaster'. The distinction between natural and non-natural (or, is 'unnatural' a more accurate term?) is often vague and misleading, drawing attention to its utilitarian construction (Mileti 1999; Ploughman 1995). Simply, what will be discussed later as the evocation of an 'act of god' element, and all of the socio-legal repercussions contained within.

In keeping with the instrumentality of existing classifications, the RMS Titanic might be contrasted against the apparent vacuous losses of the German MV Wilhelm Gustloff by Soviet submarine (Provence of Nova Scotia 2012; Wilhelm Gustloff Museum 2013). While the former is shrouded in a sort of nostalgic collective remembrance, the latter is resigned to relative historical ignorance (in North America, at least).[2] The purpose of this example is not to establish a hierarchical comparison (or competition) of loss, it is rather to demonstrate the selectivity of our experience of catastrophe. The proximal (socially, culturally, morally, politically, ad infinitum) occupies a privileged position in our construction of representations. What constitutes 'disaster' reflects socio-cultural sentiments, is temporally-specific, and is subject to change. Thus, the inherent goal of this thesis is to challenge the very term 'disaster' (and, more specifically, 'natural disaster') through an exploration of the mediated experiences of catastrophe and risk, in particular, by approaching disastrous events as popular constructs reflecting dominant and normalized social and cultural narratives (Clark 2012). More simply, I will explore

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[2] The MV Wilhelm represents the largest loss of life in maritime history. The ship sank in 1945 with a death toll of 9400 civilians, more than four times that of the Titanic, whose loss of life approximated 1500 individuals.

the mythogenesis of the shipwreck, past and present, in order to extrapolate the role of myths in dominant disaster narratives.

Methodologically Speaking

A primary focus of this paper is to investigate the similarities in human-sea narrative elements that exist within both the RMS Titanic and the Costa Concordia events. Thematically, this includes the role of the ocean/cruise ship as an instrument of pleasure and transport, as a vehicle for the perpetuation and cultivation of shared values, and as a device for the narration of dramatic and adventurous exploits. Unique to the sea-vessel is this seemingly paradoxical, indeed contradictory, combination of variables: human law/laws of nature; organic/artificial objects; the capacity of foresight/insight; constructions of morality/amorality. Encapsulated in the illusion of control, humanity is subjected to the trials and judgments of (its very) nature.

At the heart of each of these relationships is a dichotomous metaphor. Each provides a backdrop to fundamental relationships between humans, the physical environment, and each-other. These narratives are enacted upon a symbolic expanse of progress, wherein humans reach into the future while grasping onto previous conceptions of the ideal (of heroes and villains; of goodness and badness). These conceptions are the compass with which to navigate the unknowable future. As such, disaster has been and continues to be framed within metaphor-rich guidelines.

To this ends, this project will examine disaster metaphors as represented by new media, in particular news media, during what will be referred to as the 'sense-making

period' immediately following an event.[3] I will focus on how mythologies are constructed and how victims/survivors are presented. I will also briefly explore potential motivations underpinning disaster texts. Throughout, I will substantiate the view that disaster representations produce important social and cultural effects and seek to realign ideal and actual values. This is especially the case during vulnerable (i.e. uncertain) periods, when the saliency of meaning-imbued action is at the forefront of understanding.

Albeit under highly variable circumstances, media representations of disastrous events rely upon broadly cohesive metaphorical narratives. The express purpose of these representations is to promote or discourage certain types of action (Mileti et al 2004). The result is that mass media reduce complex human actions and experiences to dualist judgments (i.e. notions of right and wrong), and ignore many of the theoretical propositions of the past three decades (Fischer 2008; Quarantelli 1983; Tierney 2006). There is a definitive lack of compatibility between scientific and mass cultural understandings of crisis. Common across social phenomena more broadly, the depiction of catastrophe in cultural products, such as written and film texts, contribute to fantastical views of how and why disaster happens. This confounds the goals of scholarly and for-profit media productions, the concern of both being to attract a substantial and dependable audience.

This is important for three reasons. First, mass media is often one of the first sources of information for disaster victims (Quarantelli 1983; Sorenson 1993). It should be noted, however, that accountability varies: when choosing which texts to consume,

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[3] By 'sense-making period' I am referring to the moments immediately following traumatic events, wherein individuals 'make sense' of what has happened. It is during this period that individuals draw on the social, cultural, experiential, emotional and cognitive resources that enable them to establish empirical and ontological logics that provide frameworks for how and why the event took place.

individuals assess the validity and reliability of media sources. As such, critical engagement allows consumers to assume more active roles in the consumption process and provides a way for individuals to reject sources that are less legitimate (King 2004). Second, inaccuracy intensifies inequalities by reaffirming existing stereotypes and "common sense" notions of how the world functions and the space one occupies within that world (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). Third, by perpetuating incorrect, misleading, and/or over-simplistic conceptions of human behaviour, media impedes dialogue during important moments in history. This last point is, in my view, most debilitating, as media, when found in this form, intends to entertain (therefore, retain an audience) by relying on sensationalism and the manipulation of human emotion and emotionality (Kuttschreuter, Martien Gutteling and de Hond 2011). Lost in this endeavour are representativeness and the potential for discussion.

This thesis will answer two questions: during the days immediately following the Titanic and Costa Concordia disasters (the explanatory period), what dominant myths were present in mass media representations; and, what mechanisms does mass media employ to perpetuate and endorse dominant myths. I will take two main theoretical positions. First, to understand the discursive nature of myths in modern Western culture, I will rely on Roland Barthes' (1972) approach to mythologies, whereby myth occupies a text's "second-order signification". Myths, taken as such, are presumed natural, taken-for-granted, omnipresent, and/or normalized identity-shaping signs and symbols present in our everyday worlds. I argue that disaster portrayals are only successful in assuming a naturalized state through their intended and superficial meanings (primary signification).

Second, in order to further understand the qualities of myths in everyday life, as both removed from and constitutive of separate realities unto themselves, I will include a secondary reading of myths in keeping with the work of Jean Baudrillard (1994). I will employ the concepts of simulacrum/simulacra to describe the role of the simulation in our media-saturated world, all the while remaining careful to avoid the trappings of post-modern navel-gazing, wherein scholarship fails to open itself up beyond limited and circular understandings of the world. Through these two approaches to mythologies, my analysis will adopt a critical positionality, intent upon exposing the constructed qualities of sign systems and their cumulative effect on the construction of particular narratives of disaster.

The thesis is organized into the following parts: an introduction, including opening remarks and a summary of relevant literature, two chapters, and a brief conclusion. Chapter 1 will consist of an analysis and theoretical interpretation of select semiotic models. In Chapter 2, I will investigate the formation and manifestation of disaster myths, present my two case studies (RMS Titanic and Costa Concordia) and provide an analysis of the two events using my own mythologies classification system. This theoretical model provides a framework to analyse narrative and discourse in a manner suitable to the thesis' aims. It allows for the alignment of theory and object and provides a clear and direct classification system to explore disaster media. Lastly, in my concluding remarks I will explore the potential impact of myths on disaster events and culture and the thesis' contribution to the broader field of disaster studies. In this final section, I will provide suggests and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Recent changes in the Earth's climate and the type and frequency of extreme weather events brought about increases in the quantity and scope of disaster literature. Contributing to a growing body of research, such studies are no longer limited to the fringes of social or natural sciences, and instead have come to represent a vast and dynamic multidisciplinary field, with integrated components in local and regional governments across the world. Despite growing consensus on the importance of understanding crisis periods, the following literature review will demonstrate that research often produces vague, if not contradictory, explanations of how and why individuals respond to extreme threats associated with natural hazards.

The sharp divide between disciplinary backgrounds complicates the type of analysis appropriate to this study. Indeed, which variables to measure, at what scale, and how to best capture lived experience while honouring Weber's ethic of *Verstehen* continues to pose challenges (Swedberg 2006; Weber 1968). The following section includes a brief summary of recent research. This will provide a background to better explicate the successes and shortcomings of recent efforts.

Foremost it is imperative to specify what it meant by disasters, in particular to tease out the artificial reference to inherent or innate processes evoked through use of the term 'natural'. For the purpose of this project, 'natural disaster' is considered a misnomer: the term encompasses events resulting from the collision of human and geophysical phenomena (in the two case studies, the intrusion of humans on a naturally occurring environment). Since the two most recurrent criteria employed to classify disaster relate to death tolls and property damage, for this thesis, disastrous events are

those that result in significant loss of life (more than 50-100 deaths) and for which non-human factors are a salient feature. Indeed, disasters as constructs provide for a more lucid framework from which to operate: though often classified as such because of catastrophic human or physical costs, exposing and re-appropriating this concept allows for greater freedom to explore the actual nature of natural disasters honestly and without pretense.

Three categories of disaster literature directly relate to this thesis: first, texts that refer explicitly to risk perception and cognition from both practical and theoretical perspectives; second, investigations and theoretical positions relating to behavioural elements of crisis and response; third, those researchers and texts that direct attention to the presentation and representation of disasters and experiences of crisis. It is this final category and its role in the creation and stabilization of mythologies that is of utmost relevance to this project.

This project will utilise literature that explores the complex relationship between humans and marine events and processes, specifically texts that inform and direct current disaster mythologies. As such, I will unpack disaster mythologies as constituted in popular Western interpretations of the human-sea engagements. I will do so in spite of or possibly because they represent humanity's attempts to rationalize the unknowable and tame the untamable. These ideas as well as others will be explored at the conclusion of the review.

<u>Risk: When to be Afraid</u>

Efforts to link risk and perception predominately rely upon an association between ontology (in this context, one's sense of being) and cognition. Theorists such as

Ulrich Beck (1992; Cottle 1998), Deborah Lupton (1999; Tulloch and Lupton 2001), and Anthony Giddens (1990) formulate the perception of risk in terms of how feeling insecure is inextricably linked to attempts to rationalise away potential sources of insecurity. In modernity, this is tied into the sense that risk is at once unavoidable, immeasurable and all-pervasive. These theorists explore the dialectic between fear and security in the age of unknowable risks in order to explain the strategies employed by actors to minimize feelings of anxiety and discomfort.

Implicit is the conflict between actual and potential realities: subjects are manipulated into becoming increasingly rational objects of self-evaluation and intervention (Ugilt 2008). Consequently, members of society can alleviate feelings of threat, large and small, through conscious action. Integral are Foucaultian notions of governance and responsibilisation, themes which appear throughout late modernity's unique technologies of (risk) management and social control (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991; Ericson, 2005; Foucault, 1990; Rose, 1999). The perception of risk as embedded in cognition provides an opportunity for intervention, the interpretation of ontology as primarily a process of understanding and reflection is pervasive in recent literature on risk.

Informed by the technique in which mass and personal media assume primary roles in the formation of a secure self are representations of risk and danger (Silverstone 1993; Cottle 1998; Cohen and Metzger 1998). Television and the internet media provide opportunities to identify and locate oneself within broader society. Mass media also affords a unique venue through which to broadcast risk scenarios and avoidance strategies (Baker 1979; King 2004; Kirschenbaum 2005; Mileti 1995; Mileti et al. 2004;

Mileti and O'Brien, 1992; Quarantelli 2002). Despite the proliferation of risk-related research, including the work of affect-based theorists, risk perception and risk reduction strategies continue to rely upon rational actor models. Rational actor models take for granted the preponderance of actions informed by either an awareness of all possible available options or the capability to act out each option within personally or socially feasible manner (and given pre-existing understandings or experiences).

Here risk is taken as either an individual and cognitive process or as social-psychological zero-sum venture, whereby gain is maximized with minimal perceived loss. It is my opinion this heuristic lacks an awareness of the relationship between patterned historical embodiment and the potential for action to be viewed as viable or inviable. Theories on security and the everyday come closest to acknowledging the importance of integrating these ideas into more holistic approaches, though the divide between disaster literature and theories of risk and security continue to diverge on the topics of security and the everyday at the micro level (Tierney 2007; Tierney et al. 2006). At the time this thesis was written, Foucaultian and other post-modernist thought, though both widely adopted and critiqued, has not been employed by mainstream disaster theorists.

Response: How We Respond

Throughout the previous half century, representations of hazards and hazard responses underwent a transformation, prompting re-evaluation of disasters as locations of pandemonium and disorder and ushering in more nuanced multi-tiered contingency frameworks (Quarantelli 1993; Quarantelli 1997; Mileti 1995; Mileti et al. 2004). Prior to this, disasters were considered "personal misfortunes" and the domain of private

organizations (Tierney 2007). The wake of unanticipated and severe disasters coupled with the growth of the post-war welfare state placed greater responsibility on the state apparatus to prevent and alleviate disaster impacts (Haddow et al. 2011). Changes that took place over subsequent decades included the adoption of The Disaster Relief Act in the United States in 1974 and an increased recognition of and reliance on integrated (both vertically and horizontally) management systems (Haddow et al. ibid.). Researchers concluded that individual and group responses to hazards were more complex and dynamic than previously thought.

Additional emphasis would later be placed on vulnerabilities and, albeit less frequently, alternatives to systems theory, such as critical and Marxist theories (Buckle et al. 2003; Tierney ibid.). The preponderance of practical, empirically-based models stabilized researcher reliance on either systems or organizational theories as primary perspectives in the field (Drabek and McEntire 2003; Tierney 2007). While such theories are useful in macro- or meso-level analysis, they presume structural forces to be stable and universal. This unspoken realism has the potential to distort and negate opportunities for interpretive or creative action.

Dominant theoretical approaches to decision-making and organizational mechanisms would benefit from alternative approaches. In particular, perspectives that are compatible with new forms of governance wherein individuals and groups self-manage and self-responsibilise though the identification, categorization and management of risky populations and behaviours. Indeed, the shift from personal misfortune to impersonal risk assessment reflects the practical approach already in place within both the public and private sectors (Drabek and McEntire ibid; Tierney ibid.). Incorporating

theories and paradigms that emphasize the fluidity of social interactions and the on-the-spot decision-making would complement outdated structural-functionalist disaster research.

Though there has been greater adoption of constructionist and symbolic interactionist theories, social scientists continue to focus on the construction of events rather than on group formation, the motivations underpinning individual behaviour, or on reflexive awareness during and following disasters (Tierney ibid.). Lacking in these organizational perspectives are multi-level analyses centred on linkages between representations and associated interpersonal and intra-personal response phenomena.

Representations: How We Behave

Recent events demonstrate the persistence of disaster mythologies: from news media portraying the depraved aftermath of Hurricane Katrina through testimonials and morally suggestive photography to recent texts emphasizing the instrumental egocentricity prevalent among sea disaster survivors. Each of these is an example of disaster mythologies in practice (Elinder and Erixson 2012; Fischer 2008). These frameworks provide a venue to promote certain behaviours while condemning others. A potential benefit of normative representations is the possibility that individuals will be dissuaded from undesirable actions, while being persuaded to engage in acts of heroics or self-sacrifice (Frey et al. 2011). Constructing disasters in this way results in contradictory expectations about what to expect from high risk situations, yet allows experts to step in with recommendations and contingency plans that are both moral as well as practical (Mileti and Sorensen 1990).

Evidence suggests individuals are predominantly distrustful of non-local media sources and are skeptical of rapid response demands, which tend to originate from distant or disconnected authorities (Mileti ibid.; Mileti and O'Brien 1992; Quarantelli 1983; Quarantelli 2002). As recent events have demonstrated, breakdowns in communication systems pose legitimate concerns during crisis and further alienate the public from seeking information or assistance from these sources (Tierney et al 2006; Van de Walle and Turoff 2007). Individuals instead often draw upon existing social networks, utilizing linkages between families, friends, and pre-existing group relations when making decisions and planning future action (Blanchard-Boehm 1998). Responses are both immediately as well as retrospectively rationalisable: activity that takes place during this period is kept within existing modalities, rather than becoming abstract or anomalous. However, a preponderance of organizational theory within disaster literature continues to engage this dualism while gaining little headway into understanding the unquestioned routines of the everyday. Failing to acknowledge non-dualistic modes of action from within the discipline as well as through media representations encourages the continued endorsement of good/bad and hero/villain dichotomies and hinders the legitimacy of both disaster scholarship as well as mass media outlets in general.

Current disconnect between mass media and actual disaster behaviour(s) results in misconceptions concerning the formation of positive and negative social elements. The preponderance of anti-social portrayals in news media does not reflect the tendency for pro-social behaviour to manifest as intensified networking and cooperative endeavours during and immediately following crisis. One example of this is the growth of in type and variety of grassroots organizations as a disaster unfolds (Tierney ibid.). Mass media's

failure to account for this type of phenomenon contributes to misunderstandings surrounding what to expect and how to best plan for extreme events. The persistence of fear-inducing myths in mass media helps to explain, in part, the growth of alternative media information sources (including social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter) (Murthy 2013; Murthy and Longwell 2013; Sutton, Palen and Shklovski 2008; Yates and Paquette 2011).

At an organizational level, Emergency Response Information Systems (ERIS) connect government and non-government workers and volunteers during and following disasters, and have undergone greater scrutiny by specialists following recent events in the United States (Van de Walle and Turoff 2007). Recognition that these systems have failed in the past led to suggestions and efforts to integrate user-generated content and social media into existing organizational frameworks (Murthy ibid Murthy and Longwell ibid; Sutton et al ibid; Yates and Paquette ibid.).

In recent studies, focus has shifted from primarily macro-level response to user-generated or agent-based content in the reporting, management, and assessment of disastrous events (Murthy ibid; Murthy and Longwell ibid; Sutton et al ibid; Yates and Paquette ibid.). As an embedded object of the everyday, social media presents a way to challenge top-down mass media organizations whose external presence lacks legitimacy and logic for many individuals. Among concerned parties, social media is a tool to find information concerning loved-ones or opportunities for volunteerism. For those in the midst of a disastrous situation, social media provides a vehicle for what are often more reliable, accurate, and representative messages. This provides a welcome opportunity through which to seek assistance or establish resources throughout decision-making and

response efforts. User-generated content has the added benefit of bypassing physically, temporally, or culturally retarded or inappropriate mass media channels when on-the-ground accuracy is of utmost importance.

Though researchers suggest greater representation reduces traditional biases, one concern is that existing biases are merely replaced with similarly biased alternatives. For example, individuals or communities without consistent internet access or appropriate skills to utilize social media technologies will fail to establish a presence through these means regardless of prejudicial shifts. A lack of inclusion and misrepresentation are important areas of study for current researchers (Tierney et al ibid; Murthy ibid.). Although the aims of news editors and directors, government agents, and academic scholars do not align, there is promise that this is slowly changing. In time the greatest friction might very well exist between scholars and mass media agents.

Looking Ahead

The preceding sections demonstrate a general absence of variety (both in scale and scope) within disaster studies. In part, these shortcomings could be remedied through the inclusion of disaster research across the social sciences. Conversely, greater specialization would do little to foster relations across disciplines. In particular, knowledge-sharing between the dominant disaster community and each individual discipline must be of utmost importance moving ahead. This would do much to foster truly trans-disciplinary scholarship within disaster studies. As it stands, monopolization by a handful of select research bodies limits recognition and funding opportunities for those outside the limited sphere of influence.

The self-identification by researchers in disaster, crisis, risk, critical and conflict theorists, and contributors in related fields is another important way of constituting a stable 'community of practice', and would be a step toward establishing dialogue across academic and non-academic fields (Wenger 1998). As a model for the conceptualization of interdisciplinary engagements, Etienne Wenger (ibid.) states that such communities are comprised of individuals and groups that share certain features and that form a collectively engaged group centered on three primary features: domain, community, and practice. Here individuals share a 'domain of interest', a common area of expertise or knowledge-base, endeavour to maintain a community predicated on information sharing and jointly facilitated peer learning and cooperation. Finally, shared commitment to practice, including pragmatic and communicative commiseration (organically and mechanically) provides the thematic conditions through which relationship-building strategies might arise (for instance, multidisciplinary academic conferences or workshops, topical inter-departmental meetings and discussions, presentations and lectures by governmental and non-governmental officials at post-secondary institutes all establish and maintain communities of practice).

Though most, if not all, theoretical models struggle with appropriate application procedures, certain foundational criteria already exist within disaster studies. Indeed, in this instance it is not difficult to ground Wenger's theory as fundamentally a matter of broadening and intensifying communicative opportunities and relations between experts (and budding experts) and promoting research possibilities across individual disciplines. These are attainable goals and it is the aim of this paper to act as yet another brick in the foundation of a new, more inclusive field of disaster studies.

1

Of Mythic Intent

"I liked myths. They weren't adult stories and they weren't children stories. They were better than that. They just were.
Adult stories never made sense, and they were slow to start. They made me feel like there were secrets, Masonic, mythic secrets, to adulthood. Why didn't adults want to read about Narnia, about secret islands and smugglers and dangerous fairies?"

"Different people remember things differently, and you'll not get any two people to remember anything the same, whether they were there or not."

(Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*)

Introduction

Life is fragile: at some point a choice must be made. The decisive moment of truth depends on the turn away or towards some version of evil. Indeed, this entrenched dogma is what makes Western culture so easily adaptable and universalizing. As consumers of popular culture, it is satisfying to forecast the turn of another being, fictional or otherwise. Actors more often than not neatly conform to this ongoing dialectic: agents do good and are idolized or do evil and risk swift and total vilification. The choice is simple and the outcome infinitely gratifying.

Yet can this chasm be reconciled? Can we conceive a culture that gives nuance to myriad and complex human experience? By the conclusion of this thesis, I hope to have provided some tools for engaging such a task. To know the myths which guide our everyday understandings of the world is to be part of the ongoing dialogue with forces that shape our lives. To seek knowledge is to occupy an active and engaged position. The operative word is invariably knowledge. As such, this chapter will provide the foundation for an analysis of shipwreck mythologies that are to take centre stage in the subsequent sections of this thesis.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to explicating what is meant by myths and mythologies. It seeks to answer the question: what constitutes 'myth' or 'myth work' in mass culture? I will explore the construction and utilization of myths as part of an ongoing semiotic process. As such, a review of relevant mythology literature will be interwoven with implicit and explicit reference to semiotic theories. Since the creation of disaster myths is reliant upon signs and sign systems, I will focus on the importance of semiotics in the construction of certain explanatory frameworks known as disaster narratives.

After an introduction to these two related works, mythologies and semiotics, I will provide a functional definition of mythologies as appropriated by Roland Barthes and his colleague and successor, Jean Baudrillard. To better understand the role of myths in the formation and framing of disasters, I will build on the concepts of simulacra and simulation as featured in Baudrillard's seminal text. In Chapter 2 I will present my own mythological classification system, to be utilized as a framework for analyzing the RMS Titanic and Costa Concordia. While this approach includes multiple scales to allow for both discourse and narrative analyses, the intersection of hero-villain myths at both levels

demonstrates the complexity of this mythological system. The purpose of the first chapter is to establish mythologies as systems of signs, whose presence acts to actually create events. In the final chapter I will employ this perspective to work through two significant case studies. It is at this point that I will focus specifically on shipwrecks, by classifying and delineating specific mythologies relating to the sea and to events deemed 'disastrous'.

Of Myth and Rhetoric

Mythologies are symbolic systems that have the potential to influence subjective understanding within a population (Dynes ibid.). They frequently take the form of visual or print media, and exist through collections of signs and symbols, with a sign being "anything which 'stands for' something else" (Chandler 2002: 2). Signs direct the reader to a text's intended symbolic meaning. This includes both denotative and connotative meaning: the former representing the literal or intended meanings, the latter standing for unintended or latent implications. In practice, myths operate as representations rather than merely direct manifestations of meaning. The infinite potential of the connotation cannot ever be fully delimited: grasping a sign's potential signification field is at best a Sisyphean task, and at worst an impossible undertaking, encompassed by a largely unknowable expanse of associative linkages. Indeed, this is regardless of how universally accepted the denotation (Chandler ibid.).

As myths are but collections of signs, mythogenesis, the study of myth formation, seeks to uncover complex evocative processes entrenched in human perception and subjectivity (Barthes 1972). What constitutes the power of myths and how they come to be so permanent a part of popular culture evades any attempt at simple or straightforward

delineation. Myths are subject and object, signified and signifier, written text and utterance, a single story and a collection of discursive narratives. As an example, images of a nuclear holocaust, a governmental official's beverage choice, and the technological habits of Western youth all act as mediums of meaning as well as mechanisms of cultural and ideological transmission (Menotti and Fernandez-Vincente 2013). Through each of these socio-cultural representations, collective opportunities for cultural and ideological construction manifest.

The variability of myths suggests restriction to particular and definitive objects or ideas is a problematic affair. Extending mythologies beyond the visual aids in its dissection yet further confounds its nature. Simply, one can move too far towards the conceptual lest we lose sight of how the symbolic is actualized in the material world. However, once myths exist strictly within a theoretical realm, they are no longer grounded in the material world and fail to present as sign systems. Indeed, the sign cannot exist without at least one signifier and (potentially infinite) signified object(s). The myth and its related references is thus a relationship that must be explored conceptually as well as materially. In keeping, this thesis concerns both the etiology of myths as well as myths as practice.

Considering myths as collections of signifiers, it is imperative to establish a base understanding of the vast and multidisciplinary field of semiotics and the dynamic interplay between sign and referent. As it is inevitable that the conceptual nuances of this specialization demand further clarity, I have provided descriptions that sketch out complex relationships otherwise proven cumbersome. As expected, a review of semiotics contained in a single chapter has undergone substantial abridgement. For this reason,

Chapter One might be considered the metaphorical charcoal etching of an idea. It is not a pen-rendered pointillist-style historicist portraiture. For interested readers, a consultation of the reference section of this thesis would prove a useful starting point for more extensive texts.

<u>Semiotic Text</u>

Semiotics and semioticians are broadly concerned with the symbolic nature of signs and sign systems, their interpretive, denotative, and connotative implications, and their usage and occurrence in everyday life. Simply put, a sign may be thought of as anything that stands in for something else. The symbolism of signs resides in their reliance upon a consumption, or reading, grounded in symbols or symbolism. For instance, symbols often take shape through linguistic networks, in particular the employment of language systems to facilitate and promote understandings.[4] The linguistic structure represents an attempt to universalize meaning through the control or manipulation of signs and symbols (Barthes ibid.). As is often the case in the social sciences and humanities, this process suggests a tension between those who wield the power to construct meaning and those with the ability or inability to exercise agency and autonomy when employing such systems.

Though there is a tendency to view signs as pre-digested packages of meaning, this thesis does not aim for such an argument. Rather, sign systems are not in themselves omnipotent directives; the sign's reader is nudged toward cognitive or emotional responses, rather than coerced into submissive consumption. Current semiotic theories have moved away from such totalizing structures towards highly reader-based modes of

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[4] Linguistics is the interconnected network of universally understood symbols, signs and associations.

deployment and rationality (Barthes 1977; Barthes and Duisit 1975; Eco 1986, 1992, 2000; Hall 1980, 1997). The capacity for subversion and appropriation is the subject of most recent semiotic inquiry. For example, even within major news agencies, questions concerning the authenticity of social media texts depicting experiences of disaster are both implicitly and explicitly addressed (O'Hagan 2014). Issues of generalizability, dependability and the potential for authenticity once again come to the forefront of both academic and popular inquiry (Mannay 2013). Similarly, theorists have further investigated the manner through which new media technologies actively create realities, locally as well as globally, for both producers and consumers (Virilio 2007).

In order to capture the shift from structuralist to actor-based (post-structuralist) approaches, I have adapted several models based largely on the work of two early semiologists, Ferdinand de Saussure (1974) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-58).[5] I will then relate these to the ideas of later theorists, namely, Stuart Hall, Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard, whose approaches incorporate greater emphasis on the materiality of a signified object and its capacity to signify a multiplicity of concepts and ideas. Within this framework, both dyadic and triadic models will be presented. The two differ primarily in the nature of the sign-reader relationship (Chandler 2007; Guiraud 1975). These signification models provide tools to guide the reader through the last section, as I delineate my corresponding theoretical approach.

The dyadic model defines a sign as comprised of two essential components: signifier and signified, form and concept, sound and thought (See Figure 1). The one is inherently dependent upon the other, but they do not inherently represent one another.

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[5] Similar models may be found in any introductory semiotics text, including those listed in the bibliography.

Signifier and signified are linked through their relational power, rather than their essential co-representativeness. There is no inherent value for a given sign, it is the relationship between object and concept that is a learned association, dependent upon a relationship to one another as well as to other signs. Similarly, signs signify other signs rather than material reality (Baudrillard ibid.). According to Saussure, the signifier and signified are "intimately linked", as "each triggers the other" (Chandler ibid: 17). As such, neither exists as an independent entity. For example, the word captain comes to represent a collection of qualities, the denotation being "the pilot in command of a ship" (Oxford University Press 2014).

The connection between referent (piloting a ship) and signifier ('captain') is not intrinsic or natural, yet over the course of history and through the act of reiteration two phenomena come to share a normative association, distinct from other signs. Primary signification is established through an associative process, wherein sign employment reaffirms connotative conventions (Barthes ibid.). This process reinforces the abstract dyadic relation between form and concept. In addition, signs become significant of what they are not, in relation to what they are not: the signifier 'captain' signifies the concept 'captain', not an aviation pilot and not a ground navigator. Hence, whether there exists a material reality behind the sign is moot. Instead, Saussure's argument is structural in its emphasis on language's lexical power and, in this instance, the manner through which signs act upon external reality, subjectivity, and rationality (Chandler ibid; Guiraud ibid).

By contrast, Peirce's triadic model accentuates the importance of both the material object as well as individual interpretation. Peirce's *representamen* is akin to Saussure's signifier, whereas his *interpretant* includes both signified meaning as well as

other signs evoked through readings (Eco ibid.). Replacing a signified with an *interpretant* enables the sign to signify other signs, rather than simply signifiers. Accordingly, theorists who have built upon Peirce's triad stress the limitless potential of significations once the reader is re-presented as interpreter (Barthes ibid.).

Hence, Peirce's triad affords the recipient greater accommodation than Saussure's model, extending interpretation beyond denotative domination and establishing greater interpretive potential (including a system of signification deemed 'unlimited semiosis') however structured by pre-established linguistic systems (Eco ibid.; Barthes ibid.). Similarly, Saussure's dyadic model has undergone a process of materialization in recent history, such that the purely abstract notion of a sign has lost favour among adherents of his approach (Chandler ibid.). Furthermore, neither set of theories need bracket the referent in order to address the sign-object relationship.

How signs are interpreted is dependent on, among other things, existing code systems (Chandler ibid; Hall ibid.). Codes act as frameworks for understanding, dictating to the reader the appropriate signifiers in a given situation. For example, the appearance of a butcher knife in a horror movie suggests different signifiers than in a culinary television program. In media, the reading of the knife as a sign (of violence or kitchen utensil) in these two instances is possible only if the intended meaning can be taken for granted. Codes facilitate shared signification. However, codification neither portends universality nor pre-empts diversity of appropriation: the presence of multiple and overlapping codes (primary; secondary; etc.) as well as reader positionality prevents structural reductionism from assigning excess authority to any one set of signifiers. Despite apparent contention, the existence of dominant codes must be acknowledged. As

mythologies rely upon common understandings to be effective transmitters of meaning, codes provide an important analytical tool for making sense of mythological narratives and are thus an integral component of this thesis.

Contemporary theorists who have published on codification and the relationship between signs and media include Stuart Hall (1980) and Umberto Eco (Caesar 1999). For Hall, cultural identity is sustained through cultural codes, or the shared cultural lens that enables signs to transmit information. Codes thus enable signs to become part of a broader cultural discourse. Hall focuses on how the process of 'encoding/decoding' renders a text legible to a public, and whether the coding procedure enables the reader to negotiate and affect the cycle of meaning-making in media. The impact of this research is twofold: first, it supports previous evidence that signifiers produce multiple referents; and second, because multiple readings can coexist (often within the same individual) the deployment and connotation presents an opportunity for re-signification to affect the type and quality of signs (presenting a potential consumer feedback loop).

As multiple possible readings exist, a primary function of signification is the alignment of codes, the compatibility of codification and interpretation. The slippage between intended and actual readings is intensified by code-switching, or the displacement or replacement of one set of codes for another. [6] According to Hall, signifier-signified relationships rarely inhabit straightforward responses, nor do they progress singularly or linearly from form to concept/idea. Messages are coded so as to conform to relevant discursive patterns. Meaning, media communicates discursively, or

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[6] An example is the in-text substitution of words for those of different linguistic system (ex: conversationally replacing 'meeting' with 'rendezvous').

rather, as an authorized contributor to the existing 'body of statements' relating to a particular subject or event (Hall 1980: 210).

Hence, studies on discourse include only those actors with the authority to contribute to this dialogue, to the signs and symbols, thoughts, perceptions, subjectivity, and ideas, of any given era. However, the dynamic and symbiotic co-constitution of public and mass media 'frameworks of knowledge' provides an opportunity for public involvement in discourse formation (Hall 1908: 130). How natural a sign seems is dependent upon the alignment of intended and public readings, which itself results from a code's extensive distribution or intensive indoctrination, say, beginning at a very young age.

To this end, Peirce presents the widely adopted 'trichotomy of signs', comprised of iconic, symbolic, and indexical signs, to further clarify the reader-sign relationship. The first, iconic signs (such as a statue of a famous politician or war hero), resemble, qualitatively, that which is signified (Chandler ibid.; Guiraud ibid.). By contrast, symbolic signs (such as algebraic symbols or linguistic alphabets) represent arbitrary relationships between signifiers and signified. Lastly, indexical signs, while not arbitrary, do not share a high degree of similarity between the two features, though present a certain connectedness to their signifiers (road signs are often examples of this sign type). Of these three signs, codes often manifest in iconic signs, whose legitimacy once recognized *en masse* is assumed through its accurate representation of a social or cultural group.

As adherents to this trichotomy, both Hall and Eco emphasize that icons act as powerful discursive tools in the naturalization and normalization of denotative significations (Hall 1980: 133). Since codes are essentialised they often remain

uncontested. As such, the ability to 'near-universalize' signs within a group, suggests that allusions to common icons reaffirm membership and identity, yet only if these references have similar (or near-universal) effect. While unlimited semiosis complicates the role of interpreter (and subsequently, the creation of useful or representative signs), Eco sidesteps this issue through his emphasis on different types of readership.

The model reader experiences the intended reading of a text (including signs), and is the text's foreseeable audience; empirical readers follows no such trajectory, instead imbuing text with additional unintended significations. The model readings are the focus of this thesis: empirical readings, however informative, are beyond the scope of this paper, as investigations into sign systems of this kind invariably requires ethnographic research to maintain validity and relevance. On this point, Michael Caesar (1999) summarizes Eco's position quite aptly: "the purpose of semiology is not to 'study the mental procedures of signifying but only communicative conventions as a phenomenon of 'culture'"" (60). It is this position that I, too, have assumed.

While it is difficult to qualify interpretive processes or predict how a sign will be consumed at the empirical level, model readings depend largely upon a producer's ability to reduce messages to the most succinct signifiers, thereby limiting potential referents or references. The creation of icons aids in the communication process: at best, key associations are established, and at least, a sufficient number of alternative references are eliminated (Eco ibid.). Thus, icons and symbols are powerful narrative and discursive elements in myth creation.

Though both Hall and Eco focuses on the communicative aspect of signs, text, and codes, Hall's main contributions to semiology is his 'encoding/decoding' model,

through which he details the production, transmission, and consumption of text (Hall ibid.). Complimentarily to Hall's decoding process, through which codes are linked to sign systems, Eco is, arguably, most famous for his 'interpretive semiology', wherein the interpretive turn shapes and limits texts.[7] Text form signs that effectively and efficiently communicate meaning through codes. Depending on the approximate universality of codes, signs may be employed as discursive tools.

To this ends, Roland Barthes has much to contribute. For Barthes, both the *interpretant* as well as the structures of power reproduced within signs are of significance. While first-order, or primary, signification may be the intended reading, second-order, or latent, significations are Barthes' main concern. The intended signification (similar to Eco's model reader) is contrasted against the chain of associative signifiers produced through latent readings (Barthes ibid.). Both the universal and particular readings shape public perception, but it is the latent effect (that which goes unsaid) that was especially intriguing to Barthes (1993).

Mythologies are symbolic systems meant to influence subjective understanding within a population. They take the form of visual or print media, and exist through collections of signs. These signs direct the reader to an intended symbolic meaning of a text. This includes both the connotative and denotative meaning. In practice, myths operate as representations rather than mere producers of meaning. It is the infinite potential of the connotation (as mentioned earlier) that cannot ever be fully delimited. Indeed, delineating the signified is a largely infinite affair, regardless of the recognisability of a signifier (Hall ibid.).

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[7] The interpretive turn according to Barthes et al. signifies a shift in focus from structural to post-structural analysis, from the authority of producer to the interpretive capacity of the reader.

The ability of a sign to become associated with other signs is the foundational power of a myth. As previously mentioned, the intended signification's normative authority influences the reader through its naturalization of dominant socio-cultural narratives. Recognizing the common characteristics between signs helps uncover the mythologies underpinning cultural products. The multiplicity of potential signifiers marks a shift from the tyranny of sign over *interpretant* that is an associated quality of structuralist theories (Barthes 1977). Mythologies for post-structuralists are at best an attempt to direct an audience, with the operative word being 'attempt'. They are not necessarily reflective of universalized cognitive, perceptive, or subjective responses: in this way myths are actively produced, rather than passively consumed.

More to the point, mythological narratives are frequently deployed rhetorical devices (Barthes and Duisit 1975). For Barthes, myths take the form of tropes and metaphors, figurative text reliant on learned associations (codes) between object and subject. When coupled with the literal or descriptive, figurative language gains greater legitimacy than it would alone. For example, when mythic allegory is inserted into news texts, the result is a more sensationalized version of actual events (Ploughman 1995). In these instances the role of myths in society often alludes to individual and group value judgments (Blumenberg 1997). The ability to read such devices, particularly mythic elements, is possible because of successful code alignment (Hall ibid.). Thus, the intended reader manifests through the use of successful coding techniques.

When signs direct the reader towards references which fail to capture the experiences of reality they depict, the potential for sign systems to represent simulated versions of events becomes possible (Baudrillard 1994). In these instances, codes

continue to allow individuals to make sense of signs, yet the signs themselves do not align with the signifieds they connote. If the simulation of reality through sign systems no longer represents the signification of an external reality, signs may become simulacra, signs signifying other signs, rather than any original object. To be more explicit: while any sinking ship may become a visually signified in photography, wide distribution and consumption of a particular sign presents the opportunity for that (often iconic) sign to assume denotative authority over signification.

The disaster image is a useful example of this phenomenon, as the concept and ideas evoked supersede content of form. The shipwreck presented in media might involve any number of vessels, and need not depict the referenced event. What matters is the efficacy of the signifier and its contribution to a particular form of reality (the hyperreal). Indeed, post-disaster inquiry often reveals 'fake' or inaccurately referenced images or 'facts', though these details matter little, since the overall effect of simulacra resides in the presentation of such events as 'real'. This 'realness' simultaneously dissimulates some aspect of reality. It is precisely this relationship that myths reinforce.

While Baudrillard's and Eco's use of simulacra reflect changes in technologies, the bulk of previous theory is situated within an earlier technological age, and therefore are engaged with processes of production and consumption oriented towards a modernist media landscape. This begs the following questions: can Barthes', McLuhan's, and Hall's theories still remain relevant in today's climate, do modern cultural theories appropriately lend themselves to the study of new media, and have mythological significations in post-modernity led to changes in the formation or character of myths themselves? Even as the contributions of these thinkers continues to inform cultural studies on both sides of the

Atlantic, the answer to each question would appear to be both yes and no. Indeed, in keeping with much contemporary thought, it is inevitable that adaptations must invariably occur.

Today's increasingly interactional media is an area of interest for social scientists. These investigations remain critical, albeit less dichotomous, and are fixed on understanding dynamic and complex communications landscapes. To this ends, theorists have successfully adapted earlier theories to explore, in greater depth, elements of post-modernism and post-structuralism in new media (Bolter 2014; Grusin 2010; Mitchell 2014; Tremblay 2012). Increasingly, studies expand on the variability of sign experience and interpretations across geographical and cultural groups (Dunne 2010; English 2014; Menotti ibid.). However, even as post-structuralism gains legitimacy, existing concepts such as mediation and transparency are being displaced by the introduction of new ways of thinking about media (heralded as post-post-modernist theories).

One such shift is Bolter's and Gruin's (2000) theory of *remediation*, or the transferability of text from one medium to the next. According to remediation, actors engage multiple and inconsistent media messages competing for transparency and immediacy. However, messages are ultimately mediations too pluralistic to form one singular narrative. While this may address the technologically-deterministic or utopian critiques of contemporary theorists, it is in effect a re-working, rather than an abandonment of previous approaches (Marchessault 2014; Trembley 2012). Indeed, Bolter and Gruin's application appears to have renewed interest in McLuhan's theories and provided opportunity to reformulate key ideas for use within subsequent semiotic analyses.

New media's capacity for intertextuality (texts whose meaning is largely dependent on references to and deployment of other texts) remains loyal to Baudrillardian and Barthesian thought. (Chandler ibid.). Similarly, Bartmanski's (2012) iconographic enquiries suggest over-reliance on materiality sidesteps the true depth of abstraction. While icons are intertwined broadly with the ideas and ideologies of a given period, the persistence of icons resides in their capacity to represent collective sentiments. Simply, social phenomena are co-constituted through symbolic objects themselves but also through objects' signification power. Thus, a study of iconic signification should jointly account for both materiality as well as iconicity. This current scholarship demonstrates key challenges to the understanding of signs and interpretation: with explicating the nature of signs to interpreters, signs and sign systems, and the ongoing problematic of developing interpretive codebooks that do not fall back on naturalistic or totalizing logics.

Building on the interrelation between intertextuality, materiality and abstraction, I will henceforth investigate the creation of mythologies through signs and sign systems, with a focus on the construction of explanatory frameworks known as disaster mythology narratives. My application of 'discursive narrative' adheres to the definition put forth by Barthes and Duisit (1975). These theorists postulate that discursive narratives are collections of sentences that form a coherent rhetorical arrangement. For example, myths situate events within the symbolic realm through references to particular signs and sign systems. Their authority over denotation is brought about by their ability to be effectively deployed as convincingly legitimate narratives. This underlying logic will form the basis of my explanation of myths to follow in the subsequent section.

To better understand the role of myths in the formation and framing of disasters, I will build on the basic overview of semiotics from previous sections in the chapter. Understanding the significance of symbolism provides an integral background to any discussion on myths, and establishes a crucial launching point for further analysis of specific mythic types. The subsequent section will explore some common theoretical approaches to myth, as well as to the role of myth in society. In particular, emphasizing the work of Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard.

Use of the concept 'myth' in this chapter will frequently overlap with that of other contiguous semiotic instruments (not limited to metaphor, trope, or synecdoche) (Chandler ibid.). At the core of the matter are the mechanisms of deployment and the processes through which media and information technologies (de)naturalize social phenomena through systems of signs and symbols. Fundamentally, each of these semiotic devices is capable of obscuring or modifying, through representations and presentations, particular versions of reality.

<u>Mythology as Concept</u>

This section includes an exploration of the concept and socio-history of mythology as it relates to disasters. Specifically, mythologies in this instance will include phenomena that manifest at both the micro- and macro-levels, often simultaneously. While approaches to myths vary according to disciplinary perspective (anthropological, psycho-analytical, philosophical, historical, etc.), this thesis broadly defines myths as those narratives meant to explain or describe events in a culturally coherent manner in order to assist in the perception, subjection, or cognition period preceding or succeeding a catastrophe (Blumenberg 1985; Segal 1999). Disaster myths operate through references

to the individual as s/he relates him/herself to the social body. Macro-level myths are collective sentiments, while micro-level myths position the individual subject within a framework of expectation, as an articulation of the ideal subjective and objective sentiments of a given group. Through this classification system, macro- and micro-level mythologies will be shown to intersect and mutually reinforce one-another.

More important than level of influence is logic of influence: myths permeate the sentiments of readers (individual, group, societal) in ways that are, more often than not, simultaneous, instantaneous, and non-reflexive. Habituating text or sign recognition rarely, if ever, results in exactly the same reading, regardless of scale. For this reason, I acknowledge the employment of a classification system that is at present invaluable if non-generalizable.

Micro-level myths may be thought of as a subject's attempt to reconfigure macro-level myths into deployable (grounded) actions. Symbolic behaviour, such as the enactment of myths in real time, is significant in that it represents/effects the broader value or belief systems of a given group. Membership to a group often demands a certain degree of adherence and conformity to dominant value systems, particularly if the symbolic is to be maintained as a universally accepted standard of engagement (without underestimating the myriad readings of value-laden texts).

As myths draw upon multiple heuristic mechanisms, the categories presented in this section are foremost meant to aid conceptual clarity. Taken as isolated or exhaustive classifications, this system cannot possibly capture the variability of perceptive and constructive efforts that take place in society on a daily (per minute!) basis. What this system *can* do is provide an excellent starting point for analyzing dominant myths and for

exposing the methods and mechanisms employed in their construction and deployment. The following section will explore key approaches to the study of mythologies, briefly touching upon perspectives from the intersecting fields of sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and literature studies, before adopting a critical socio-historic lens for the remainder of the thesis.

At its most fundamental, a disaster is neither natural nor universal. Instead, a disaster event first and foremost signifies the perceived occurrence of catastrophe, be it material or symbolic, which may or may not result in substantial human loss or suffering. The imperative component is an observer's perception of loss. Rather than absolute death tolls or widespread impact, 'disasters' are afforded significance through some degree of social impact (disorder, collapse, or destruction) or human suffering (death, injury, or loss). Representing disaster (or, crisis, catastrophe, devastation) necessarily relies upon processes of association. Phrased tautologically, the stories we tell about disasters are themselves dependent upon common taken-for-granted 'truths', which provide the foundation of dominant social and cultural understandings of the world (presented as self-evident 'truths') (Furedi 2007).

For their part, those who endorse a Romanticist interpretation of myths are concerned with demonstrating that myths provide an informative narrative, such that humans might better understand their relationship to the transcendental (Blumenberg ibid.; Segal 1999: 136). Theorists such as Joseph Campbell (1949) stress the commonalities of mythologies harkens to the existence of one master myth, the monomyth, which permeates all facets of a given society. This heavily criticized version

of romantic theory, often due to perceived over-generalization, is undeniably all-forgiving in its qualifying criteria.

Myth according to Campbell takes the form of near limitless cultural products and practices, and is an indispensable director of the human psyche. As such, it serves to foster moral and social order in the ever-rationalizing modern world (Segal ibid: 137). Romanticists assert that taboo and dogma might be among the positive and functional aspects of myths that make healthy societies possible. What is lacking is valid empirical evidence to support such claims (admittedly, empirically substantiating the metaphysical might prove easier said than done). The origins of myths as well as their form prove vague and presumptive.

An alternative to the romantic approach are Enlightenment era thinkers, who either question the relevance of myths in a post-scientific revolution context or attempt to find compatibility (or at the very least symmetry) between the domains of science and myth (Segal ibid.: 9). In the former instance, myth is supplanted or overshadowed by the rise of scientific rationality. Myths as an explanatory framework become redundant once scientific causation is established. For these thinkers, myth loses its social function, and as a result, much of its relevance in the modern world. In the latter case, myths offer the potential to direct and inform when it no longer provides an explanation or literal interpretation of events or reality (Segal ibid.: 19).

Psychoanalysts, such as Sigmund Freud, and later, C.G. Jung, avoid this dilemma by repositioning myth within the individual, as a product of the human psyche, as opposed to an external force (Segal ibid.: 4). For these thinkers, myth is a projection of the forces of the human psyche unto the physical world. Myths, and their interpretations,

provide insight into the workings of the human mind and the relationship between humans and nature. Hence, both scientific rationality-based and psychoanalytic approaches alter either the function or the subject of myth in order for the phenomena to retain relevance to dominant cultural groups.

Indeed, some theorists would challenge the polarization of these approaches, using instead as launching point the idea that myths assuage generalized anxiety brought about by an unpredictable and complex world (Blumenberg ibid.). These theorists argue that individuals are connected to both the collective body and to surrounding environments through mythological systems. In order to understand the significance of mythologies in both modern and pre-modern societies, Hans Blumenberg stresses that we need only trace the underlying heuristics of seemingly rational endeavours, such as scientific experimentation and secular philosophy.

Philology of common speech and everyday logic depend on deep-rooted mythological references. For example, the endemic use of metaphorical signs systems, such as 'light/dark' (ex. Illuminated/foreshadowed). Blumenberg's underlying thesis is that the mechanisms of myth form, *prima facie*, the foundation of even the most demystified features of the current era. For this reason myths serve an integral ontological purpose, compatible with both Romanticist and Enlightenment perspectives. Blumenberg stresses that myths are inextricable from Western (and possibly global) linguistic systems.

However, the mechanisms that enable myths to retain significance in a post-Enlightenment, post-Romanticist era demand a break from purely functionalist thought. For Blumenberg, tracing the socio-history of metaphors reveals a vast taken-for-granted

network of pre-established metaphorical relationships. These concepts comprise the foundation of all rational and non-rational thought, and are present throughout recorded history. By acknowledging the role of signs in modernity and pre-modernity, (such as the terms 'light' and 'dark'), this position accommodates linkages within myths and myth-making across time and place.

While Blumenberg argues that myths are invaluable descriptive devices, he intentionally skirts a more critical theoretical stance. As a consequence, the role of myths in any given society is at once essentialised and universalized, through the fundamental failure to consider the myriad nuance of mythological types and mechanisms. Indeed, it is the operation of myth, rather than the origin, that is Blumenberg's thesis, and the ontology of myth in this case is more related to description than explanation. A broad generalizability, which extends across a vast and varied cultural catchment, accentuates a disregard for cultural particularity. However, the purpose of the thesis is threefold: to demonstrate the importance of myth as a sense-making tool, to challenge strictly rationalist and existentialist perspectives, and to provide a viable alternative to the subject/object debate. To this ends, Blumenberg provides a compelling philosophical argument.

In direct contrast to philosophical or psychoanalytic assessments, as well as functionalist justifications, critical and cultural theorists explicitly question the role of normalized and normalizing mythologies within societies (Barthes ibid.). These theorists investigate whether signs contribute to inequities in cultural representation and whether they privilege certain understandings of social groups and positions. The goal of these investigations is to uncover the degree to which mythological narratives foster social or

cultural privilege, by valuing certain interests or perspectives over others. These theories will be given greater consideration than social-psychological approaches or functionalist thought as it is within this body of literature that my thesis resides.

Semiotic studies of myths intersect with cultural studies, often employing empirical observations and analyses. Modern and post-modern cultural theorists, such as Barthes, Eco, Baudrillard, Paul Virilio (ibid.), produced critiques informed by the work of Susan Sontag (1977), Marshall McLuhan (1967), and Stuart Hall (ibid.), among others. The impact these individuals had (and continue to have) on the interpretation of signs has been immeasurable.

An important element of cultural studies research focuses on the analysis of mythologies in mass culture, in particular their occurrence in mass media. For these researchers, myths take many forms, serve many or no functions, and are both fixed and fluid between and among sub-groups (Hall ibid.). For the above-mentioned thinkers, it is the myth itself that must be considered. Often the mechanisms through which myths come to exist, for example, as dominant components of news broadcasts, are of particular interest. Indeed, myth as rhetorical device is regularly featured in mass media critiques (Moeller 1999).

Since economic preservation is a key component of any for-profit agency, media texts are first and foremost geared towards a target audience that will help obtain revenue. As such, the potential for visual or written text to convey stunning and emotionally-charged messages is key to capturing audience attention. Indeed, this dynamic is the focus of Sontag's (1977) seminal exploration of violence in media, wherein photographs present miniatures of reality, rather than interpretive representations. One could argue

that narratives in any medium are but an attempt to grasp at the 'real'. The authoritative firsts-hand account attests to the desire to grasp power: to describe events as they actually occurred is to monopolise denotative authority over reality as it happened, when it happened.

Though texts take many forms, frameworks of social and cultural positionality highlight the insidious tendency of signs to disguise their own discursive capacities (Barthes ibid.). The combination of captivating visual and salient written texts reinforces a sensationalistic depiction of reality, prompting signification of a particular sort, rather than a move beyond signified content.

Myths in media demonstrate the contingent upon which an ideal producer-reader dynamic exists. Shifting focus from the approximation of intended with actual readings, the simultaneous endorsement by both encoders and decoders of existing conventions naturalizes the operation of code systems through signs (Hall ibid.). If dominant connotations are re-presented as denotative significations, the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified is further institutionalized. The constructed nature of a denotation is thus disguised. When encodings seamlessly translate into intended decoded messages, codes assume a position of authority over sign systems. There is certain inextricableness between how a sign ought to be read and the mark or gesture indicative of the underlying idea or concept.

Codes act as foundational elements in the shared membership of cultural groups. They fix meaning in a population through their effects on respective sign systems. Shared understandings of the world allow myths to facilitate communication of the ideal connotation (Barthes ibid.; Chandler ibid.). For Barthes, the preferential connotation

forms the denotative meaning: denotations representing the connotation that has reached near-universal status. To matter within a culture is to be legible within a population, to contribute to existing discursive models, as an endorsement or in defiance of conventional rules of representation (Hall ibid.).

Codes, then, are an invaluable component of cultural formation and contribute to the discursive representation of events through the act of legitimating the stories comprehended through signs. These stories are then retold as dominant narratives within the social body and join the discourse that shape events. As these stories become the fodder of cultural production, the collective identities that differentiate our group from other groups, they manifest as mythological narratives, as the myths with which we are discursively engaged.

This critical narrative approach has inspired countless cultural studies across myriad cultural mediums. Of these theorists, media and communications research is prominent. Eco, Baudrillard, and Virilio critique disaster and technological advancements as portrayed in media, while McLuhan's 'media as message' (or 'massage') was adopted and pushed to an extreme in Baudrillard's controversial conception of the *hyperreal* (Baudrillard 1995; Harris 1996). Ultimately, as a pioneer in the field of culture, Barthes' influence on Baurdrillard and Eco is most evident.

The use of technology to transform the signifying capacity of mythologies has had an unparalleled effect on the representation of the world's events and its inhabitants. Technology has facilitated the dispersion of culturally codified products such that readers may share few other cultural connections apart from the ability to recognize dominant codes as they appear in highly globalized cultural environments (Hall ibid.). Through the

combined forces of internet and personal hand-held devices, code-switching is becoming an increasingly meaningful reality-shaping mechanism (Rodriguez 2014).

Indeed, in recent times theorists who employ empirical methodologies continue to explore whether technology facilitates or hinders inclusivity and knowledge-sharing across time and space (Murthy 2013; Murthy and Longwell 2013). These individuals focus on the manner through which ideologies and belief systems are communicated via internet and related mediums, and how experts might intervene if disaster is represented in an unproductive or erroneous way (Mileti and O'Brian 1992; O'Hagan 2014). The divergence of theorist and practitioner resides in a greater awareness of pragmatic nuance of whether disaster warnings translate directly in the everyday sphere.

Whether it is the medium itself (McLuhan 1967), the depiction of technological progress (Virilio ibid.), or the use of photography as a tool of subjective or objective manipulation (Sontag date), the intersection of culture and power underlies much of the cultural theorist's investigations and critiques.

The next chapter will explore some of the omnipresent mythological types frequently presented in conjunction with disasters, generally, and sea disasters, specifically. From these types, common themes will be presented and explored. Three types or themes will be applied to two shipwreck events, the 1912 RMS Titanic and 2012 Costa Concordia. Media representations of the events and respective victims will be contrasted against the persistence of existing disaster narratives.

2

Representing Disaster

"What a beautiful body of water this Pacific Ocean is."
"You could bury the entire landmass of this earth in the Pacific."
(Sterling Hayden, *Voyage: A Novel of 1896*)

Introduction

In disaster literature, myths recall a shared historical or social past, one that provides the foundation from which to consider causative and existential qualities of disastrous events (Blumenburg 1985). When taken as a functional class of phenomena, they work to stabilize and orient members toward a shared understanding of the world, in particular, one rooted in commonalities that foster social cohesion and resilience. It is important to stress that these efforts represent the potential, rather than predetermined, role of myths. For this reason, it is possible to identify myriad natural disaster mythologies from within disaster literature yet nearly impossible to gauge the exact limits of their interpretive power.

Therefore, disaster myths from a constructivist or post-modern perspective do not gain significance merely through the functions they serve, nor do they represent legitimate grand narratives, such as religious, gender, or class ideologies. Indeed, in order to continue to exist at a time when identity and morality are increasingly fluid and individualised myths must retain validity at the individual level (Baudrillard 1995). If

myths in post-modern societies are uprooted from functionalist origins, how can one begin to explore the connections between where they come from and whether they continue to constitute relevant systems of communication? Though this is a question too expansive at the moment, this chapter will provide a brief mythogenesis of key mythologems (recurrent mythological themes) pertaining to disasters. This genealogy will then be expanded to include those related to the sea and seafaring culture more specifically (Mills 2003).

These brief descriptions of dominant myths and their respective socio-historical roots will provide a foundational framework from which to present my own theoretical model for investigating the RMS Titanic and Costa Concordia. My analysis of these events will take place through a critical semiotic lens to demonstrate the persistent and ubiquitous role of myths in describing and framing disasters. My intent will be to extricate myths from two different socio-historic periods to better understand how and why myths present in media at key moments of uncertainty. Similarly, the purpose of this thesis is to determine whether similarities exist in form or content, rather than to defend or challenge the social or cultural legitimacy of particular mythological types.

With this analysis I aim to make associations between ideal significations and an ungrounded cultural reference point. Through this I will posit that myths are not rooted in material reality but instead gain power through their capacity to discursively reference other signs. It is in this way that disaster myths in mass media contribute to meaning-making practices, rather than inherent morally- or socially-grounded messages.

My theoretical framework is in keeping with the French semiotic tradition. As such, I will focus on the formation of signs and symbols, and the relationship between

signified and signifying networks of meaning. The work of Roland Barthes (ibid.) will guide the early sections of this chapter, as he provides a definition of mythology in keeping with the goals of this paper; namely, to explore how the linkages between objects (signs) and their related concepts inform understandings of the cultural world. These sections will build on disaster mythologies more broadly and sea narratives specifically, including the presentation and application of a framework for the study of disaster themes unique to the maritime setting.

In these later sections, my analysis of news story narratives will explore the relationships between disaster discourses and dominant mythologems. I will argue that mythological references fail to represent grounded cultural values, and instead present as concepts referencing other concepts, empty signifiers, the simulacrum or hyperreal (Baudrillard ibid.; Chandler ibid.). In this final section, I will explicate the tendency of media agencies to employ mythologems during times of catastrophe. I aim to extricate implicit realities present in the signs news agencies employ.[8] It is through these referents that I will explore Baudrillard's simulated versions of reality.

Biblical and Ethno-Social Representations of Disaster

Historically persistent mythologems trace much of their origins to Mesopotamian biblical and pre-biblical narratives (Mills ibid.). Though the characteristics of each theme may adopt new meaning at later points (indeed, they most often do), the semblances of past discourse persists through modern-day adaptations. Indeed, elements of ancient myths reappear in the post-modern world as fragments of conceptual and ideological symbology (Mills ibid.).

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[8] In this instance, sign refers to linguistic signs specifically, but leaves open the possibility of generalizing to other sign types, such as image or video texts.

Ancient texts, such as the Sumerian/Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic and Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, persistently evoke mystical beings or events within disaster narratives. Heroes and villains are constituted through mythic struggles with nature and other beings against a backdrop of the wild and unpredictable sea (Mills ibid.). While heroic narratives differ in detail, certain qualities or themes tend to recur. One common hero-villain mythologem is the birth-rebirth metaphor, encapsulated within Joseph Campbell's monomyth framework (Campbell 1949). According to this narrative, an individual undertakes a substantial and dangerous journey involving numerous unforeseeable obstacles and challenges. Following successful navigation of these tests, the hero (at this point, villain) returns to his/her home, takes on some new status or ability, and is reintegrated back into society through ceremony or ritual (Campbell ibid.; Mills ibid.). In this way, the journey is a rite of passage for an important character. Natural phenomena act as a means of testing the integrity of a community, who in turn are united or reunited through confirmation of a shared institutional or cultural ethos.

Examples of the hero mythologem are found in important ancient narratives, including the story of Noah and the Ark, in the Iliad, as Odysseus struggles with Poseidon's relentless wrath, and the voyage depicting Gilgamesh's reconciliation of his own mortality (Mills ibid.). In each instance, the natural (non-built) landscape is a primary antagonist which helps to frame catastrophe within culturally-relevant symbology. For each epic, the hero portrayed is the hero of yesteryear: qualities common in hero tropes include the include perseverance, rationality, power or physical prowess, commitment to a higher code or ideals, and bravery.

Originally cultivated from supernatural forces or entities, heroes of ancient civilizations more often than not were the direct manifestation of mythic ideals. Hence, the cultural artefacts produced by these societies reflect deeply held standards for heroic behaviour. Featured prominently as an invaluable test of individual character and integrity, arguably the substructure for establishing heroism in a protagonist, the journey metaphor provides the backdrop for heroism to emerge (Bloom 2009; Green 1997).

By contrast, the journey itself, as will be discussed in more detail in the following section, is an antagonist in its own right. Nature, by virtue of its capacity for personification, can reflect both human as well as non-human characteristics. A violent typhoon is simultaneously a collection of geophysical features as well as the materialisation of Poseidon's forceful appendage (Mills ibid.). The natural environment's metaphorical and literal states facilitate its cooptation. Indeed, mythologists often argue that it is the effort to reconcile the arbitrary or intangible that necessitates development of mythologies (Blumenberg 1985).

Within the hero narrative, popular cultural tropes have long relied on the structure and content of heroic sea adventures and human-environment struggles (Dynes 2003). Both implicitly and explicitly, these early sub-narratives remain integral to the framing of events taking place near or on bodies of water (Blumenberg ibid; Campbell ibid.). Below is a collection of relevant themes relating to catastrophe and marine or maritime environments. It focuses on two approaches to sea metaphors, concerned firstly with the sea and secondly with the vessel or craft. Each will be explored in turn.

Disaster Mythology and the Sea

Maritime mythologies are arguably some of the most thematically persistent in popular and folk cultures across the world (Quarantelli 1985). In the Western hemisphere, texts such as Hemingway's 'The Old Man and the Sea' (1952), Homer's 'The Odyssey' ((800 BCE) 2003), and Melville's 'Moby Dick' ((1851) 2013), epitomize the analogous relationship between humans, non-humans, and nature; between life, death and rebirth; and between success, failure, and the power of the will. From prose to poetry, hymn to chantey, cultural products that depict the ocean and oceanic processes as expanses of mystery and intrigue are omnipresent. It is impossible to endeavour an explanation of human-sea relations in any context without first acknowledging the presence of a fantastical and complex socio-cultural history.

Complex human-sea narratives permeate much of human history, and the mythologies and folklore of ancient civilizations continue to inform current Western literature and popular culture. Notable are the fables and lore of ancient Norse and Greek mythologies, as well as those borne out of Mesopotamian biblical texts (Mills ibid.). Suffice to say, what constitutes disasters, at sea or otherwise, originate within pre-existing and implicit mythological contexts and must be understood as simultaneously religious, cultural, historical, socio-political, and finally, geophysical phenomena (Dynes ibid.).

In order to trace the genealogy of sea myths, one must first determine what constitutes the foundational mythology of the sea. The sea embodies myriad and often conflicting characteristics. For those who settle near or around large bodies of water, the geomorphology and geophysical phenomena of the world's oceans and rivers provide a rich resource for meaning-making and life-sustaining activities. In conjunction with complex socio-cultural systems, dynamic fluvial geographies contributed to the creation

of abundant cultural artefacts and practices. Early products and practices in turn informed subsequent civilizations whose cultures borrowed directly or indirectly from early societies (Campbell ibid.). Such phenomena include, but are not limited to, artistic, philosophical, and socio-legal sentiments.

Civilizations in close proximity to oceans and rivers tend to depict fluvial bodies and processes as multi-faceted, often tumultuous and highly pithy relationships (Dynes ibid; Mills ibid.). In sea mythology, narratives relate to the sea as object, the sea as process or setting, and the sea vessel as a symbolic object within a symbolic setting (Blumenberg 1997; Mills ibid.). Thus, in this manner sea disasters depict the sea, the vessel, and the sea voyage as either objects or locations where cultural meaning is created and recreated. It should be noted that multiple subthemes build upon these basic tenets.

For example, while the voyage or journey mythologem is a unique thematic category, the trials encountered by an individual or individuals may include actual or fictional beasts, such as leviathans, gods incarnate, or fluvial processes personified (Blumenberg ibid.). How a ship flounders may be significant or insignificant depending on how the myth unfolds: is the ship itself a symbol for humanity, a society, or an individual characteristic? Are the passengers and crew shipwrecked or marooned? What objects provide the means for future survival? The fate of those aboard shipwrecks ground the event within the sphere of the conscionable. Through personal narratives a shipwreck takes on relevance.

Shipwrecks were common occurrences up until the Industrial Revolution. However, it was not until after this period that industry standards and increased public representation brought about a decrease in the instance of shipping accidents. At the same

time, travel by sea resulted in fewer losses or damages, and overall increases in comfort and safety. At this point the experience of sea travel shifted dramatically from an undertaking fraught with danger and uncertainty to the expectation that status could assure a minimum of comfort and security (Howells 1999). These changes do not invalidate ancient sea mythologems; however, they do complicate the conceptual relevance of ensuing social categories of behaviour, calling into question the legitimacy of associated altruistic and egotistic responses. Furthermore, the sphere of individuals socialized towards lay ethical protocols narrows, with the vast majority of individuals undertaking non-commercial sea travel now unversed in formal instruction (Howells ibid.).

The following section will include a brief review of relevant modernist disaster mythology with an emphasis on the transformative effects of sea disasters as well as the sea itself as object of inquiry. In this next section I will provide a brief genealogy of disaster mythologies related to geophysical phenomena and fluvial processes.

Disasters, Modernity and Post-modernity

The construction of narrative representations is part of a fundamental desire to address disastrous events and outcomes by way of explaining and understanding the outside world (Mills ibid.). Explanatory myths therefore tend to focus on 'why' questions ('why us', 'why now', and 'why me/not me'). In particular, to present events in culturally meaningful ways, in keeping with preconfigured social and metaphysical relations. This tendency is important to building a sense of community in the wake of disaster (Green ibid.). As with all events, disasters derive meaning through their associated socio-

historical environment. Similarly, social climate dictates in large part how disastrous events are meaningfully represented in societies.

As a collection of similarly timed events, modern disasters tend to feature the interconnectivity between technology and society, in particular the relationship between technological advancements, progress and humanity, and the ethical considerations of a society drifting further away from the constraints and dogma of an outdated religious past. Disasters thus accentuate problems associated with the modernization process itself (such as unprecedented urbanization). Events also reflect novel crises of modernity (the growth and development of crime and criminality) and encapsulate the constant struggle (and failure) to dominate nature (Green ibid.). These myths reflect uncertainty regarding the appropriateness and legitimacy of technology, particularly when outcomes lack historical reference points. It is no wonder that disasters occurring post-industrial revolution (beginning mid-eighteenth century) should feature humanity's tenuous relationship with technological advancement as well as references to simpler, more traditional, eras (Chorley and Haggett 1965).

There is an underlying uncertainty in such myths concerning the human right to autonomy and agency within the context of modernist pursuits. Throughout this period the following questions recurrently arise: are humans progressing; if so, what is the price to be paid for advancement; and, finally, how does one go about measuring progress? This line of questioning bridges the gap between modern and traditional ideals, making apparent the similarities between myths of modernity and biblical myths acutely apparent. Indeed, uneasy cultural and social transitions mark the cognitive shift from

disasters as "acts of God" toward disaster as a "price of modernity". Simply: with greater achievement comes greater risk (Green ibid.; Beck 1992).

A shift was observed around the second half of the eighteenth century, with the popularisation of scientific rationalities and the rise of 'uniformitarianist' thought (Chorley and Haggett ibid.). 'Uniformitarianists' did not endorse the view that hazards were the product of rapid and unpredictable climatic or geological events. They similarly challenged the normative tendency to remove disasters from reliable scientific investigation. For uniformitarianists, disasters did not and could not take place unexpectedly because they adhered to existing natural laws. For these reasons they should be studied scientifically, as are other physical land processes, using the same methods and informed by the same criteria.

Guiding this shift was the belief that if scientists could study and monitor physical land processes, it would be possible to mediate their effects through technology and scientific know-how (Beck ibid.). If hazardous events exist outside the mystical realm, then they were the responsibility of individuals and the scientific community. Onwards from this, it is humans rather than divine beings that are accountable for the outcomes of events.

The institutional deployment of disaster mythologies falls within two interconnected categories: first, they represent ideal individual behavioural responses (micro); and second, they are an attempt to resolve broader social, cultural and ethical dilemmas or positions, addressing questions of social or socio-political progress and human nature (macro). At the macro level, existentialist debates are borne out of pre-existing social structures, often religious or moral in nature (Blumenberg ibid.).

Similarly, narratives surrounding the Scientific Revolution are mythologized as unquestioned truths. Disastrous events are but one opportunity for this ideological shift to present itself (Green ibid.). This is not to say that previous (and enduring) understandings are more or less mythical. 'Wrath/act of God' narratives of previous centuries remained as foundational logics, affecting public documents, legal frameworks, even the scientific community (Blumenberg ibid.). Evident in post-Enlightenment era discourse is a lexicon that implicitly references the mystical. Similarly, the rhetoric of the Enlightenment is itself a form of mythology: an ethos of secularity and impartiality become unquestioned narratives underpinning and explaining the social world. Thus, as the language of myth was appropriated rather than discarded, a diversity of mythologies coexist and appear when appropriate.

In the socio-legal sphere, mythologies permeate best-practices and cultural norms. For example, both lay public and legal professionals rely on mythical narratives to describe experiences and events. These descriptives in turn reflect and influence formal regulations. The slippage between formal and vernacular meaning is extricable from all social acts. Though originating in one arena, best practices are borne out of direct contact with countless others. Individual mythological references are the product of broader social discourses. For instance, myths that begin as macro-level queries lead to maxims for individuals, and vice versa.

Similarly, individual appropriations have the capacity to alter mythological conception. The 'act of God' phenomenon originated out of an overt reliance on divine interventions, yet has become a useful tool for assessing liability (Blumenberg ibid.). The legitimacy of 'act of God' explanations has since decreased, corresponding with the drive

to regulate outcomes and responsibilise (and prosecute) negligent parties (Green ibid.). Demonstrated here is the tendency for catastrophe to be described in a manner that makes social and cultural sense: in a socio-legal modernist environment mythologies are integrated into bureaucratic processes, often through their entrenchment in formal legal texts.

The growth of pre-established mythological systems guides adoption of related principles in other avenues of social life. This relationship has had an important influence on the construction of catastrophe. A focus on rationalization and order placed extreme importance on knowledge as a means of control. If catastrophe exceeds a certain minimum threshold of harm, perceived or actual, then the likelihood of public outrage increases. In such situations it is imperative that descriptive frameworks help mediate negative response. What is initially an 'accident' might be reframed 'negligence' if it appeases the public. This emphasis on responsibility draws attention to the very limits of modern technology to control and prevent accidents from taking place.

Differentiating between accidental and non-accidental has thus become an issue of intent. Theorists such as Judith Green (ibid.) speculate that the successful application of scientific rationality might eventually eliminate the accidents altogether. A perfectly controllable world is undeniably mythic: a population of programmable citizens (not to mention infinitely manipulatable environments) denies agency in favour of an ever-deployable ideal response. Issues of blame and intentionality draw upon mythical qualities of responsibility and duty, particularly a commitment to common goods, and an absence of human fallibility. A societal system comprised of efficient and all-knowing

beings personifies heroes and gods of yore, rather than pragmatic and imperfect collectives.

Changing conceptualizations of catastrophe are evidenced in the transition from modern to post-modern societies. Modern societies institutionalized Enlightenment ideals for the express purpose of knowing and ultimately exercising control over heretofore unexplainable or unpredictable variables. High modernity or post-modernity shed ridged institutional aims in favour of pragmatic and dynamic approaches. Failure to eliminate catastrophe, to accommodate the unknowable, as well as a greater employment of multidisciplinary models within the scientific community, refuted the efficiency and expertise of unimodal perspectives.

An increase in accident-based paradigms focused attention on the friction between modernist ideals and humanity's limited capacity to contain and control. (Green ibid.). In post-modernity, scientific rationality monomyths are challenged (Campbell ibid.). Post-modernity therefore presents another opportunity for multiple disaster narratives to coexist: shifting social realities provide a suitable environment for alternative myths to arise. While it may seem counter-intuitive for mythologies to retain descriptive validity in a demystified milieu, the growth of alternative narratives decreases the authority of modernist rationality. Additional explanatory frameworks reinvigorate the potency of mythological devices by legitimating non-rationality based alternatives for how and why catastrophe occurs.

The Titanic marks a token manifestation of the hero myth within the socio-legal domain. While the grounded cultural artefact (the 'women and children first' protocol) arguably gained the greatest attention during this event, it would later be applied to

largely dissimilar contexts. Though myth is no less meaningful in either instance, the connotations have changed.

The next section aims to make connections between micro and macro discourses using my own theoretical approach. My framework builds on previous scholarship in order to facilitate understanding of how myths contain references to both individual and societal forces. In the subsequent sections I will present the two case studies that employ this method.

Presenting a System of Analysis

The previous sections describe the intersection of micro- and macro-level myths. Revealed themes include: the role of technology and the meaning of progress in society (questions of modernity); the accuracy and dependability of morality metaphors to describe and explain (biblical-based); and the existence of nationalistic and eugenicist understandings of difference (race hierarchies). These three categories focus on questions of modernity, the legitimacy of biblical institutions, and racial hierarchies.

Taken as a network of interrelated dialogues, this framework provides an opportunity to explore the interconnectedness of societal discourse and personal narrative. It does not, however, give preference to either micro or macro elements of a text. It is macro directives that provide the context for narrative devices: one might think of narratives as individual instances of discourse manifested in the social. By framing an idea within broader dialogues, news agencies attempt to direct readings toward particular types of meaning-making. Similarly, personalizing news texts grounds discourse in 'real life' examples. The following will provide a brief review of the benefits and

shortcomings of this classification system and of my approach more broadly in order mediate potential reification and naturalizations.

As with all organizational systems, my approach is intended as a pedagogical instrument for the purpose of conceptual clarification. It is not an exhaustive or static representation of logical differentiation at either the individual or group levels of analysis. However, I believe it provides an invaluable tool for investigation. Most importantly, it is more pragmatically appropriate than alternative approaches I encountered during my research. As this system is borne out of my own expertise, it is dependent upon my understanding of both academic as well as mass media disaster texts throughout recent history.

To begin, consider the distinction between society as a denotation (crudely, a collectively formed group of individuals who share commonalities relating to goals, values, or ways of life) and society as connotation (the evocative effects of social formation, in the form of positive and negative sentiments, that alter perceptions from within and outside a social formation). 'Society' as category allows sociologists to take into consideration both the physical and socio-affective organization of a social group. It also provides opportunity for critique or critical reflection. Thus, any classification is itself is greater than the sum of its parts, not least of which because it invariably takes on discursive meaning and durability.

The categorization system detailed herein exposes the disaster myth as a socially constructed object. In an openly self-critical manner, I will demonstrate the often arbitrary nature of categorization systems, while exposing the tendency of these systems to become persistent and pervasive conceptual frameworks. Just as myths are detached

from grounded cultural realities, so too does a genealogy of myths risk reifying the very simulations it seeks to expose. Keeping these seeming contradictions at the forefront of the author and reader's consciousnesses will prevent reification of such narratives.

It would be counter-intuitive to present a system intended to analyse myths without including this initial disclaimer. Instead, in making connections between the authority of narrative and the power of discourse I plan to provide insight into the limitations of existing myths in post-modernity while allowing for possible alternative signs and significations. In the subsequent section I will analyze signs and symbols referencing select mythologies for two historical case studies, the HMS Titanic and the MS Costa Concordia. I will apply my own theoretical model as delineated above.

Disaster and the Media

This section will serve to substantiate micro and macro mythologies inherent in disaster narratives while simultaneously grounding Baudrillard's simulacrum within two disparate events. The purpose being to demonstrate the presence of mythologies in media and, more importantly, to determine the nature of the hero/villain sign system itself: in particular, the intended referents in media depictions of disasters and the connections that are established between related objects and concepts.

Both print as well as new media are employed in this analysis. Though inherently different mediums, each represents a culturally-situated means of communicating information across a vast, literate audience. Each also remains dependent upon technologies most relevant to the current socio-historic period. For the Titanic event, I included articles from three cities: New York, Halifax, and London. These cities had relatively high involvement in the events following the disaster and: was the site of initial

enquiry, was the largest city nearest the wreck, or was the location of the final enquiry. Each location thus provides a degree of variability while retaining validity for those who contributed to the creation of early Titanic myths.

By contrast, online agencies featuring the Costa Concordia were chosen according to different standards. Articles were selected based on the reach and location of the news agency, with an attempt made to similarly include agencies from three different cities. Due to access issues, the London Telegraph replaced the larger London Times, and only two of the three cities were included in the analysis: New York and London. A third source, the Guardian, has a large international readership and claims to be the world's third most-read paper. Based on readership levels, the four large news sources retain a similar degree of cultural legitimacy, while the inclusion of a fifth source (The Halifax Herald) provided an opportunity to situate the event within a locale most proximally affected. Thus, on the one hand the two samples are satisfactorily comparable and on the other provide sufficient news products to conduct a theoretical analysis.

Chosen articles detail the events up to two weeks after each incident occurred. This timeframe ensured a variety of content yet limited focus to the immediate after-effects. As my focus is on how an event is constructed shortly after taking place, it was important to limit the scope of my analysis to the response period. Articles chosen are those freely available to the public: seventeen articles describing the Titanic disaster and eleven articles related to the Costa Concordia. Books and other texts were omitted for the reasons described above or to maintain the narrow scope of analysis.

Each event provides a venue through which news agencies reconcile catastrophe and its aftermath, particularly with regards to the impact of disastrous events. Given each

period's safety standards for sea travel, the resulting loss of life and financial assets are comparable. Beyond this, differences discussed below highlight key changes in discourse for each socio-historic setting. Differences and similarities between static constructions of heroism and villainy and the changing social climate will be touched upon.

Furthermore, I will conduct a two-pronged critical analysis of news texts. Firstly, I will explore macro-level signifiers, situating accident discourse within broader socio-cultural concerns. To determine the connection between micro- and macro-level signifiers, I will investigate the use of personal narrative as it relates to broader discursive dialogue. Secondly, my analysis will ground discourse in signs intended to guide individual action through relational, rather than absolute, authority. To this ends, I will employ the work of aforementioned semiologists as well as that of Norman Fairclough (2003), whose critical discourse theory will assist in forging connections between individuals and society (Philips and Jorgensen 2002).

My aim is to make connections between news media and the evocations of narratives that no longer have the same cultural relevance they originally possessed. While it is expected that referents inevitably transform and connotations invariably diverge, my goal is to demonstrate how heroic narratives reference other signs, rather than material reality. I do this cautiously to avoid substantiating idealist perspectives, and I maintain it is the denotation which takes on an authority over its referent, and that it is this dynamic, rather than material reality, that is significant. Attempts to influence readings are of greater interest than proving the existence of a superior referent.

Mythologies of heroes and villains pertain to cultural artefacts from another time and place. These myths are less frequently substantiated in existing ideology or material

reality. As such, they are losing the degree of validity they historically held. Referents contained within hero/villain sign systems are therefore reliant upon a series of concepts to which no material reality exists. In this dynamic resides the potential for mythological concepts to become floating signifiers. At the end of the chapter I provide some concluding remarks about this process and the possibilities for mythologies in a post-modern world.

Titanic: Myth and Legacy

On April 15th, 1912, after colliding with a large mass of ice, the RMS Titanic sank into the Atlantic Ocean. To this day, it remains among the most infamous of events in the Twentieth Century (Neilson and Roberts 1999; Howells ibid.). Recent advances in luxury and speed set ships like the Titanic apart from previous sailing vessels and renewed public interest in sea travel. Indeed, the benefits brought about by self-propulsion would be short-lived, with innovations in air travel to later dominate the market (Howells ibid.).

Thus the Titanic embodies a sentiment of nostalgia for many: its sinking marked the end of an era in sea travel and ushered in new relationships with the natural and built environments. From this point onward, travel by sea would diminish in favour of casual jaunts between select port cities. Crossing the Atlantic by ship would henceforth become the domain of the sky. In this way the Titanic has become mythologized as the quintessential signifier: a sinking ship marked the end of an era.

Countless survivor accounts and biographies have been written in the hundred years since. Given the inconsistencies of human memory, myriad potential accounts exist. It is therefore unsurprising that contradictions exist between what happened and what could have happened. In the days immediately following the disaster, news sources

reconstructed, through first-hand observations and recollections, the events aboard ship. These narratives coalesce discursively when represented alongside broader socio-cultural norms.

Each of the three sources focused on different aspects of the event. In particular, actions of survivors were consistent with the unique interests of each reporting agency. To a certain extent this is to be expected, yet it is important to note that the historically situated aims and values of each agency could alter both intended as well as the actual readings in potentially unknowable ways. In the interests of full disclosure, my own reading and analysis are inextricably and inherently situated within the context of late modernity.

Three macro themes emerge from the articles, each reflecting a particular positionality. The discourse employed within each reflects different political, social and cultural interests. Subsequently, the discursive character varies between texts. Greatest nuance exists between intended (Halifax), departure (London) and receiving cities (New York). However, the three cities adopt similar mythological elements, even while emphasising certain perspectives over others.

Though each area's references are culturally specific, similarities exist. Narratives consistently oriented the reader towards sensationalistic depictions of heroism and villainy: as events were recounted, behaviours of survivors and witnesses invariably substantiated dualist responses. The most emotionally charged language set was deployed by the regional newspaper, The Halifax Herald. In all cases narrative devices were used to illustrate events and to personalize dramas. Sources continually referenced traditional

understandings of heroism and villainy. Dominant myths (heroism, villainy, the ship and journey) reinforced the consistency of cultural norms during times of crisis.

This functionalist approach is in keeping with the tendency of news media to collapse the distinction between social and anti-social and in doing so accentuate collective values (Hall ibid.). This process focuses attention on a specific principle by contrast against its apparent deviation. The contrast, rather than content, is what gives this approach the power to signify. Everyday act gone awry are but one media trope: in these instances, language normalizes an extraordinary act or event by grounding it within a framework of the ideal. Simply, what is unfathomable is at once situated within a structure of understanding so that it might at once become tangible and reconcilable.

Within such frameworks amorality is forgiven provided it remains within the heroic mythologem. For example, the Titanic's assistant Marconigram operator is forgiven his murder of an unarmed civilian as his behaviour was but an effort to protect the senior operator from theft. Through this morally and legally dubious act, he saves his companion and mentor from misfortune. Thus violence is situated within a narrative of selflessness and a sense of justice and bravery, and, it goes without saying, is absolved from condemnation.

A second metaphor is the ship as floating city. The Titanic is as ubiquitous example of this microcosm of society, complete with diverse social hierarchy and culturally diverse locales. Inside, ambiguity exists as to the happenings beyond: myriad distractions provide backdrop to the reassuringly mundane consistency of the open ocean. The Titanic was unique in this regard, being one of the twentieth century's most decadent examples of traveling entertainment. While North America and the United Kingdom

inched closer to the start of the Great Depression, this 'midnight hour' opulence paid homage to the successes of modernity. The irony of celebrating progress at this historical stage is not lost: unbeknownst to most, the Titanic would be one of the last passenger ships of its kind to cross the Atlantic. Regardless, the ship continues to represent the virility of humanity, and the power of humans to influence each other and the geophysical environment. While both ship and journey are removed from everyday realities, they remain embedded within the vernacular and collective sentiments of each nation.

Heroism and the triumph against evil are the kind of underlying cultural myths Barthes (ibid.) would later critique in his writing. Of these myths, two types of significations emerge. First order and second order signifiers, such as those describing the actions of a particularly heroic passenger, represent a narrative within a narrative: to understand an individual's behaviour as positive or negative we must perceive their actions within the context of cultural codes. These codes are reproduced ad nauseam through a collection of cultural texts, which demand coherent preceding and succeeding narrative deployment. These significations are both intended and explicit. The explicit and representational (first order) are contrast against the collection of cultural references implicit in the image or written text (second-order). The latter references are less overt, endorsing and reinforcing shared values while effectively side-stepping critical engagement and contradictory messages. It is the critical analysis of both denotation and connotation that must be addressed.

Barthes' mythologies relate directly to the three aforementioned categorical narratives (modernity, biblical, and ethno-racial). Issues of modernity and the cost of progress are echoed in narratives concerning existing safety protocols, particularly

minimum lifeboat requirements. The decadence of first-class luxury and its ability to have (allegedly) lulled passengers into a sense of wanton security recall gluttony, hedonism, and the stringent punishment brought about by the excessive pursuit of worldly satisfaction. Contrasted against such criticisms is a nationalistic (and it follows, ethnocentric) sense of duty and responsibility. As the ship's population was highly diverse, this rhetorical positioning both overtly and covertly biases certain passengers above others.

The greatest responsibilisation significations relate to Enlightenment era ethics of man's responsibility to man. This ethos stems from particular ethno-religious origins, and paradoxically aims to transcend and reinforce social and cultural difference. Dominant signifiers elicited through hero narratives similarly hail from specific cultural traditions based on the universality of humanity. Specifically featured are men (and women, children) who occupy universally subordinate relationships to the hero. The actions of non-heroes are of little interest to news agencies but are nonetheless integral building blocks to the hero's (or villain's) emergence.

What occurs is a process of cultural normalization during which difference is disregarded. By focusing on similarity news agencies facilitate the glossing over of ethnic or racial nuance. Dominant cultural values override and conceal difference: subsequently, the denotation of hero (villain, etc.) replaces specific or qualified heroism. In this way dominant readings of the Titanic conform to existing socio-cultural standards. Indeed, of the analysed texts cultural or social difference was not a priority or representational aim.

Costa Concordia: Contention and Class

The Costa Concordia cruise liner wrecked off the Italian coast on January 13th, 2012. The event took the lives of thirty-two passengers and crew. While circumstances were in many regards different from the Titanic, comparisons can be and have been made. In keeping with the Titanic, Costa Concordia narratives feature survivor accounts and sensationalist imagery meant to situate events within broader discursive themes.

Lengthy first-hand accounts ground discourse in experience (and ideally, reality). As featured in Titanic, Gonzo-style journalism presents texts as conversations with the public (often first-hand accounts) in order to forge connections between individual narrative and broader discourse. Again, three mythologems presented in Titanic articles feature prominently in discourse surrounding the Costa Concordia. Narratives substantiate questions of progress, responsibility, and the drive to universalize humanity. The hero or villain myths and metaphors segue into debates centred on socio-legal culpability, environmental stewardship, and ethics of duty and honour.

Traditional referents such as concepts of heroism and villainy do not simply direct future action, but give meaning to current debates. The Costa Concordia's oil spillage into a pristine Mediterranean ecosystem demands the same heroic intervention that humanity mustered in stories of yore. Indeed, it is our current duty to respond to these affronts with the same characteristic chivalry and commitment as, for example, demanded by battles with gods and demons. Mythic qualities have been both invoked when constructing disaster but also appropriated as tools to contest and relocate public and private interests.

Mythologies are channelled through coherent discursive narratives. A trend that is consistent throughout at least the previous hundred years. As with the Titanic, outrage

prompted changes in industry safety standards and mythologized the 'Women and Children First' protocol first popularized during the Birkenhead disaster over a half century prior. The number of safety vessels aboard intersected concerns of quality and diligence of existing procedure, including the extent of and adherence to safety instruction. Challenges to Captain Francesco Schettino's behaviour preceding and succeeding the event are framed within the hero-villain narrative, wherein descriptives contrast ideal with actual behaviour. The language of news sources demonizes undesirable actions while instrumentalising others.

Myths demand a certain degree of uncritical taken-for-grantedness: media agencies encourage readers to engage dominant readings in order for texts to effectively communicate intended messages. Thus, mass media intends to maximise a text's capacity to signify. For example, descriptions of Captain Schettino's life leading up to the wreck contribute an element to the overall narrative's signifying power. This includes with whom he had been rendezvousing, which beverage he may have been consuming, how rapidly he rose in the ranks to become master of ship, and his alleged willingness to put aside safety conventions to impress a former colleague. Both captains' characters are illustrated through rich biographical narratives, and ultimately through the connotations implied therein.

Western media's reliance on ancient conceptions of valour and villainy, of adventure and daring, is ubiquitous, even mundane. However, it is through linkages between founding mythologems and contemporary and current discourse that signifiers become flexible in their usage. It is through the re-appropriation of signification and the reassignment of denotation that myths take on new form.

This chapter included a brief semiological analysis of the relationship between myth and disaster, the purpose being to demonstrate how and under what circumstances myths operate through language and mass media. Two case studies substantiated the relevance of Barthesian interpretations of dominant culture and the legitimization of mythologies, especially as these present tools to vie for ideological authority.

In the following conclusion, I re-present Barthes' mythology as a key component in the creation of the simulacrum. I assume this argument tentatively, so as not to endorse the finality of Baudrillard's post-modern critique. Instead, the foundational logic which makes simulated versions of reality possible also provides opportunity for renewed meaning.

I conclude my thesis with a renewal of meaning in text: a reminder that ironic or manipulative intended readings at best represent an external force, removed from the intentions of the reader. It is again Barthes' death of the author to which Baudrillard alludes in his later work that inspires this small theoretical contribution to media analysis.

Conclusion

"In extremity, in the worst extremity, the majority of people, even of common people, will behave decently. It's a fact of which only the journalists don't seem aware. Hence their enthusiasm, I suppose. But I, who am not a sentimentalist, think it would have been finer if the band of the Titanic had been quietly saved, instead of being drowned while playing - whatever tune they were playing, the poor devils…There is nothing more heroic in being drowned very much against your will, off a holed, helpless, big tank in which you bought your passage, than in dying of colic caused by the imperfect salmon in the tin you bought from your grocer… And that's the truth. The unsentimental truth stripped of the romantic garment the Press has wrapped around this most unnecessary disaster."

(Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*)

Simulation and Denotation: Notes from the Underground

This thesis aimed to form linkages between critical media studies, social theory, and the themes of disaster and disaster mythology. My purpose is to relate the past century of media analysis to the current technological climate in order to make relevant both the theoretical approaches of my predecessors as well as forge connections between media analysis and the creation of myth. While previous work has explored this relationship in detail, literature concerning geophysical phenomena and the representation of catastrophe has not approached the topic from a semiotic perspective. In doing so, I hope to denaturalize both the concepts of disaster as well as the hero-villain dichotomy.

The current body of research would benefit from a re-situating within post-modern discourse. In this section I will do just that: through the introduction of Baudrillard's (ibid.) simulacra thesis, the processes through which myths come to exist and gain referential authority will be explored (ibid.). This analysis will then be followed by some concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

Simulacra and the Infinitely Significant

Can myths retain significance over the course of millennia or does meaning gradually fade as societies evolve? The question of whether myth appropriation necessarily represents distortion is an important one. Implosion is central to Baudrillard's work on simulation in media: in order for meaning to exist within text, significations must be traceable back to a culturally-grounded reality, a reality based on the lived experiences of consumers.

For Baudrillard there must be a connection between grounded (locally produced) culture and representations of groups in the media. When cultural products do not accurately represent the lives of those they intend to portray the ensuing disconnect opens up possibility for a loss of meaning. It is through this disconnect that an implosion of meaning becomes possible.

The previous chapter detailed the deployment of mythological references within the context of catastrophe and the sea. Dominant cultural beliefs and values are sustained through control over near-universally understood referents. Images of altruism-heroism and egotism-villainy are continually evoked in mass media to encourage or discourage public sentiment and response. In the last few decades, extensive and intensive integration of hand-held technologies has altered the role of media in the everyday sphere. This alteration has similarly co-opted public participation in unprecedented ways (Rodriguez 2014.).

This dynamic complicates the modernist top-down hierarchy as greater variability in individual readings (pending Huxley-esque developments) becomes possible. I offer this disclaimer not to discredit Baudrillardian approaches, nor to offer straw-man

justifications against extreme post-modern interpretations of his work. Instead, these complications are precisely the kind of questions that I believe lead us towards a sound understanding of Baudrillard's theories.

Hero and villain narratives of yesteryear were rooted in the values of a harsh and less-than-forgiving cultural milieu. They provided functional resources to communicate belief, status, social responsibility and order, and gave meaning to the ruthlessness and injustices of life (Blumenberg ibid.). The stories we tell continue to serve these functions yet in the absence of one over-arching cultural authority, they take on additional meanings, including creative and performative interpretations. It is now accepted that myriad significations complicate matters, yet dominant readings can still be extracted from texts. Given that signs remain operational on a 'taken-for-granted' basis suggests dominant connotations continue to be a substantial avenue for obtaining power.

In a post-modern setting, the integration of both media and capitalist ideals fosters greater competition over the authority to cultivate denotation. For example, myths of gallantry and physical prowess are signified by designer jeans or a particular brand of soft drink, the historical sign relationship is replaced with one that is highly variable, capricious, and dependant largely upon the interests of constantly changing groups (Moeller 2006). Intercepting signifier-signified relationships, particularly those operating at a self-reflexive level, is akin to harvesting a wealth of socio-historic meaning. These evocations are utilized frequently by a variety of actors yet are rarely unpacked and explored critically within mass media.

Similarly, in the field of disaster studies, governmental and non-governmental organizations aim to influence connotations so as to affect changes in perception and

behaviour. While the expressed purpose is to decrease harm, the tendency for actors to employ mythological signifiers is meaningful for two reasons. First, because perception informs action, the capacity of signs to influence perception potentially subjugates the importance of lived reality. Thus, to influence perception is to position belief as dominant over experience (Howells ibid.). Belief therefore is a pathway to controlling truth.

Second, as signs are employed in a variety of contexts, they may become sticky. By this I mean that (floating) signifiers might be attached to whatever linkages are available. This process uproots signifiers from organic cultural reality and mystifies cultural genealogies. Thus, floating signifiers risk becoming detached from realities outside those produced by fast-paced, global media actors. This is not to say that producers are passive consumers nor that authors are wholly responsible for the construction of symbolic meaning-making (Barthes ibid.). It is to suggest that McLuhan's (ibid.) return from global village to global theatre is a predictable response to this implosive phenomenon (Baudrillard ibid.).

If culture is indeed "an assemblage of texts", then an individual's ability to produce symbolically meaningful texts is of the utmost importance to sustaining cultural identity (Howells ibid: 4). Rather than adopt a deterministic attitude towards the vacuous field of consumption-driven messages, Baudrillard sidesteps his implosive thesis, wherein signs dictate and dominate human agency. As alternatives, he offers three tactics: play, spectacle, and passivity/rejection (Allen ibid.). If the origins of signs are related to neither lived reality nor current socio-cultural identities, these three approaches provide opportunity to embrace the implosive environment, to cultivate a culture of re-appropriation rather than determinism.

Reinstituting creative capacities within readings is central to highlighting the limits of mass media and mythologies more broadly. Indeed, dialogical myths continue to appear in both print and visual media, yet the limits of these myths remains to be fully understood. Social science analyses, such as those directed at psychological assessments, focus on the meaning and impact of myth on individual cognition and sentiments. These studies investigate the ways individuals deploy myths during periods of crisis or their immediate aftermaths. Given these analyses are useful, albeit qualitatively incomparable, the unspoken perceptions of actors is difficult to terse out from verbalized and external sense-making moments. Indeed, given the ethical and practical limits of observation, the intersection of crisis and myth proves elusive. Additionally, the researcher's cultural lens invariably must be taken into account, further complicated by a 'more Matrix than Matrix' setting.

However, if myth is taken as something other than directive or direct translation, then meaning might be regrounded in individual experience. Put simply, culture jamming myth creates new cultural associations and meaning-making practices, reasserting a new kind of localism. An interesting example of this would be 'hipster' culture's use of signs and symbols depicting seafaring culture (lengthy facial hair, anchor and sailing vessel paraphernalia, pipes, and woollen toques). Such cultural artefacts reference aesthetic and figurative, rather than literal realities. This sort of activity may make use of endless significations to create new representations of cultural reality from within an environment of empty signifiers. Alternatively, this behaviour risks further alienating signs from culturally-embedded origins.

The presence of play, spectacle, and passivity are not exempt from co-opting mechanisms. As hipster culture demonstrates, the ironic is an ideal venue for consumption-based ideology to take root. Even if meaning is intentionally obscured, overt, freely available, dynamic and practice-driven, it still runs the risk of becoming itself an empty signifier and a tool for mass media machines. As this paper aims to demonstrate, slippage is unavoidable yet when embraced, holds potential relative to the power of mythologems themselves. I believe it is possible to endorse the view that news media representations merely 'reflect the imperceptibility of the environment.' (McLuhan 2005). For this reason, future research might consider cultural representations, including counterculture practices, as examples of where we have been rather than where we are. If the now is unknowable, our past may hold some insight even if where we are going cannot yet be expressed and where we are cannot be perceived.

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