

## FORMS OF MEDIEVAL MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

### [Çağdaş Sinemada Ortaçağ Mitinin Türsel ve Yapısal Görünümleri]

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*The mythological and the poetic force of the cinema derives from the convergence of many elementary forms of culture. It tends toward repetition rather than innovation.*

Italo Calvino

#### ABSTRACT

This paper is a structural analysis of the use of dream vision in a popular medieval poem, *Sir Orfeo*, and the first released trilogy of *Star Wars* films (Episodes IV, V, and VI). Both *Sir Orfeo* and the *Star Wars* employ the embedded dream vision in a similar way to make the marvelous visible to their main characters. Luke Skywalker's, and Heurodis' visions turn into a potent reality preying upon the known limits of ordinary existence for all the characters involved in these works. As a result, Luke and Sir Orfeo learn to acknowledge new ways of "seeing" the marvelous, which change not only the intellectual, but also the physical limits of the world that they have come to know.

**Key words:** Dream vision, poetry, cinema, reality.

#### ÖZET

Bu çalışma, popüler bir ortaçağ şiiri olan *Sir Orfeo* ve bilim kurgu sineması klasikleri arasında sayılan *Star Wars* serisinin ilk üçlemesinde (Bölüm IV, V, VI) yine bir ortaçağ edebi türü olan "rüya vizyonu" kullanımının yapısal bir analizini içermektedir. Hem *Sir Orfeo* hem de *Star Wars*, kahramanlarına doğüstü gerçekliği "görünür" kılmak için rüya vizyonunu benzer biçimlerde işlevsel hale getirirler. Sonuçta, rüyada görünen "bilinmeyen gerçeklik bilinen varlık alanı" sınırlarını ihlal ederek karakterlere yeni bir "görme" algısı kazandırır; rüya ve gerçek arasındaki ayrım belirsizleştikçe fiziksel ve zihinsel dünyanın bilinen sınırları yeniden yorumlanmayı gerektirir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Rüya vizyonu, şiir, sinema, gerçeklik.

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The *Star Wars* trilogy has recaptured in a futuristic form what the medieval literature took for granted: a multi-layered reality consisting of powers, sources, and intelligent and ferocious beings other than the humans. Through inventing and reinventing revolutionary ways of access to “other worlds,” George Lucas has reached his aim of creating a modern myth that would challenge the status of the Western in the making of modern American mythology. The use of motion control cameras<sup>1</sup> in the first released version of the films and the three dimensional computer graphics in the second released version gave the *Star Wars* characters an unprecedented freedom of physical movement in the cinematic space<sup>2</sup>. Besides all the hi-tech machinery, Lucas also employed a rich variety of medieval themes, characters and narrative techniques like the dream vision, which have added to his mythical world a fourth dimension of the freedom of movement among layers of reality. *Sir Orfeo*, on the other hand, is a popular fourteenth century poem (probably translated into English through Celtic or French sources), which nationalizes the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice by rewriting it as a royal love story of marital love, loss and redemption. While Luke learns to recognize new aspects of his own identity through the eyes of the old Jedi master Yoda, Sir Orfeo has to dream his wife’s dream, leave his own world of reality and learn to see Heurodis’ world the way she sees it herself.

The embedded visions of the main characters in these two works function like microcosms that reveal the “mythical conception of time” and the “oppositional nature of the mythical thought” in Lévi-Strauss’ terms. According Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1967, p. 205-207), myth is a special form of language, a combination of *langue* and *parole*, or, a “third referent,” because it takes its meaning from a “non-reversible” past (*langue*), whose future forms are dormant and perceivable in the “reversible” present (*parole*). Thus, mythological time is both synchronic and diachronic—it is a mixture of the past, present, and future. Although Lévi-Strauss employs the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole* in his linguistic analysis of myth, he replaces the relation of the criticized Saussurean “opposition” between these two terms by a dialectical relation of interaction.

Because of their liminal quality, visions set the synchronic and the diachronic dimensions of time against and within each other in a dialectical relationship. They unravel negative realities on the diachronic levels that threaten the existence and the stability of the established conceptions of power and self on the synchronic story levels. Visions change the language (*langue*) the characters use to conceive and interpret (*parole*) reality. However, the negative realities revealed through visions are reconciled with the existing order of synchronicity at the end of *Star Wars* films and *Sir Orfeo*, because “mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of the oppositions toward their resolution” (Levi-Strauss, 1967, p. 221).

As Barthes (Levi-Strauss, 1967, p. 110) explains, “myth can consist modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography and cinema.” From a semiological perspective both writing and pictures are global signs and they lend themselves to the study of myth. “Myth is speech *stolen* and *restored*” (Barthes, 1967, p. 128). There is a constant game of hide and seek between the signifier and the signified in a myth. New ways of understanding can be instilled into old forms or vice versa. In the *Star Wars* films we encounter the embedded dream vision in a technological setting. The form seems to have

changed, however the message is as ancient as it can get: There is more into the physical world of reality than that meets the eye. The films seem to alleviate the viewers' fears about the loss of spirituality in the face of space age and the invention of new technological weapons. The implicit medieval message is repeated through the visions of characters: "You are nothing without the mercy of invisible power." According to Lincoln (Lincoln, 2005, p. 191), *Star Wars* uses "culturally inherited myths and symbols synonymous with the very roots of Western civilization.

In the *Star Wars, A New Hope*, in what appears to be Luke Skywalker's first training session on the way of becoming a Jedi knight, Ben Kenobi gives Luke his first lesson in wisdom: "Your eyes can deceive you. Don't trust them." Meanwhile, Luke is trying to avoid the laser beams of a baseball-like robot called seeker. Luke wears a helmet with the blast shield down, and he surprisingly manages to deflect the bolt of the seeker after the first unsuccessful attempt. Ben calls this Luke's "first step into a larger world." Thus, for the first time, Luke experiences the possibility of the supremacy of the "larger" immaterial world over the material through closed eyes. The experience is repeated successfully on a larger scale when Luke goes to blow up the evil Death Star at the end of the movie with his targeting computer closed off. During this trial, Luke is able to hear Ben's voice although he is dead by then. This voice reassures him that if he relies on his feelings and his senses (instead of on his own eyes or on the power of technology), he will always have the metaphysical "force" on his side.

Luke can not only hear Ben's voice, but also see him in a vision in the beginning of *Empire Strikes Back*. After he defeats the ice monster Wampa, he collapses on snow, cold, and exhausted. When he is about to regain consciousness, the script reads "Slowly he looks up and sees Ben Kenobi, barely visible through the blowing snow. It is hard to tell if Kenobi is real or a hallucination." Ben tells him that he will go to Dagobah system and learn from Yoda. After Han saves him, Luke decides to fly to Dagobah without telling anybody. When he tries to land all his scopes are turned off mysteriously. At this point, we realize that Ben's previous teaching has not had much effect on him, because he panics when he cannot see through the computers. Ironically, Luke only starts to believe in the power of the "force," when he sees that it is capable of raising his fighter out of the swamp in Yoda's den.

After Luke gets off the fighter, he tells his little droid Artoo that this experience is something like a dream. It is like a dream in a dream when Yoda sends him underground through a tree to meet the dark side of the force. In this famous scene, he decapitates the dark lord Darth Vader, only to find his own severed head on the ground. The script reads: "Across the space, the standing Luke gasps at the sight, wide-eyed in terror. The decapitated head fades away, as in a vision." Surprisingly, Luke does not discuss the vision with Yoda and it remains a personal experience for him. He meets the dark side of the metaphysical force through a self-reflecting vision, which reveals evil as his own image. Contrary to Ben's image that appears to Luke one more time before he leaves Yoda's den; Vader's image is more real and seems to belong to the level of physical reality. On the other hand, Ben appears as a holographic image to Luke, only brighter. These visions make the status of the real and the imaginary questionable, which results in a mixture of the synchronic and the diachronic levels of the stories.

Before he leaves the den, Yoda tells Luke that he will “see other things” when he becomes a Jedi. A Jedi “knight” is a living affirmation of the supremacy of the soul over body and of the mind over matter. Yoda tells Luke that if he lets the force take over his physical being, he will gain a whole new way of seeing, which has access to the past as well as the future. But, Luke acts upon impulse again and wants to use that insight for practical purposes as soon as he gains it, which almost costs him his life. He leaves Yoda’s home before his training is over to save Han and Leia from the dark lord, but he loses a sword fight to Vader and Vader cuts off one of his hands. His vision in the cave symbolically comes true when Vader tells him that he is his father, and Luke has to change his own conception of self from then on.

In *The Return of the Jedi*, Luke does not see any more visions until the very last scene, because he has almost completed his education through dreams in the previous films and he has started to display levels of skill that Ben and Yoda have. To save himself, Leia and Han from being eaten by Ewoks he raises Threepio and his throne from the ground in order to make the Ewoks believe that Threepio is a god. Nobody except the Ewoks shows any sign of surprise. Although Luke has to go through a stage of disbelief before he fully accepts the power of the force, seeing the existence of the same power in Luke does not surprise Leia or Han. The movie ends with a carnivalistic scene where the apparitions of Ben, Yoda, and Anakin also join the party to celebrate victory against the evil empire, but only Luke can see them. Finally, the marvelous has been incorporated into the structure of the real and the physical for Luke.

Similarly, the reality of the visible world does not seem to belong to a higher status than that of the invisible in the medieval literature as well. In *Sir Orfeo*<sup>3</sup>, the characters in the poem acknowledge the extraordinariness of the fantastic images; however, the “truthfulness” of these appearances is never a matter of question as in the first two *Star Wars* films. In *Sir Orfeo*, as in the *Star Wars* films, the status of the real is also threatened by the power of the fantastic and the magical. Heurodis’ vision breaks the boundaries between the real and the marvelous worlds. Throughout the whole poem we do not know whether she has a waking moment out of her vision in the sense we understand it as the “end” to “illusion.” The transition between Heurodis’ vision and the mainstream story level of the poem is so smooth that it is impossible to discern where one of them “starts” where the other “ends.”

When Heurodis first tells about her vision to her husband, she says: “As Ich lay this undertide/ And slepe under our orchard side/ Ther come to me two fair knightes” (133-135). The two knights do not “appear” to her, on the contrary, they “come” to her out of the fairyland. Although the maids accompanying her do not witness any of the strange sights that appear to her, and she talks about forms which “Y no seighe never yete before” (147), all of the characters in the poem take her vision literally and its truthfulness is never an issue. The lack of any disbelief or doubt on the part of the other characters in the reality of Heurodis’ dream shows that the transition between the visible and the invisible worlds in *Sir Orfeo* is blurred as in *Star Wars* films. Actually, Heurodis does not really “wake up” to her usual world after her first out-of-body experience under the ympe-tre. “The look” in her eyes changes as Orfeo notices: “Allas! thi lovesum eyghen to/ Loketh so man döth on his fo!” (111-112). The marvelous sights she witnesses in her dream seem extremely beautiful to her, but they have an obscure, evil quality about them which appears to attract her the more for that reason. She exchanges her own world of reality for the fantastic and evil reflection of it, like Anakin

Skywalker does. She lets herself be seduced away by a world of appearances and sees her ordinary life as a threat to her own existence. She chooses to obey the demands of the “king” in her dream, not to those of Orfeo and she disappears suddenly.

Heurodis’ disappearance changes not only her own conception of reality, but also that of Sir Orfeo. A whole new world becomes “visible” to Sir Orfeo after Heurodis is taken away by the fairy king. He leaves his throne and starts to look for his wife. Stripped off all of his noble titles and apparel, he has to face himself as a man, as any man, against the wilderness and the indifference of the natural world. Away from the appearances of the court, “seth he nothing that him liketh” (251). This external education in the ways of solitary survival causes an internal transformation in Orfeo’s life. However, this transformation takes ten years of solitary survival out in the forest. After that experience, he is able to “see” the “real” fairy king in the middle of the forest who seems to him like a mirror image of his former self. All those appearances which appears so attractive and strange to Heurodis does not surprise him at all: ““Parfay,” quath he, ther is fair game. / thider Ichil, bi Godes name./ Ich was y-won swiche werk to se” (315-317). For the first time Orfeo sees a king and a queen through the eyes of a commoner with no assets other than his ability to play music. The love of his life seems “so riche and so heighe” (326), and she appears so unreachable to him that he wants to die after he sees that sight. Ironically, he becomes really brave when he feels weak enough to accept death.

Orfeo’s transformation takes its final shape after he saves Heurodis from the “proude court of paradis” which is “ever light” (369). The image of eternal brightness is used here to represent the false brightness of his court life, and, at the same time, of the magical dream world, which overturns reality for Sir Orfeo. To gain Heurodis back, Orfeo uses Orpheus’ method. After an “enchanting” recital, he asks for the lady sleeping under the ympe-tre as a reward. The ymptre is the very same place where Heurodis was introduced to the fairyland for the first time. After saving his wife and himself from illusions with the help of his own art, Orfeo’s return to his own court in the guise of a beggar and his leaving the throne to his steward, among all people is unexpected, yet understandable. Sir Orfeo is completely transformed by the dream vision, a sensory education through his wife’s dream, which makes him realize that what he had taken for “truth” for a lifetime is nothing but false illusions of power and superiority.

Both *Sir Orfeo* and the *Starwars* films use similar narrative techniques and themes, which are parts of the dialectical world of myths. “What the myths revealed to Lucas, among other things, was the capacity of the human imagination to conceive alternate realities to cope with reality” (Champlin, 1992, p. 41). Like *Sir Orfeo*, *Star Wars* films will probably preserve their public appeal despite the passage of years and the changing of narrative conventions. As Seabrook (Seabrook, 1997, p. 42) states, “even if the story were to fade from the surface of the Earth, it will remain buried underground in the form of Luke Skywalker pizza boxes and Obi-Wan sixteen ounce beverage-cups.”

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