

COWMAG

SPRING 2026

COWMAG ISSUE 3

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Tessa Lieffering / UT sports&culture
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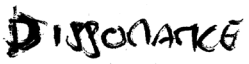
Dissonance



Imagine a myth. It can make the sky appear red, it can have life feel bottomless, deep, or postpone paradise, as it surely seems naïve before death. That is to say, myth sirens reality into question, implementing a subtext behind all that is. Therefore, by imagining a myth in the first place, you must imagine yourself within it: you hear its call, feel its lure. Its narrative structure transcribes your existence in its plot-structure, determined at dénouement; it ends, as all ends eventually. However, myth does not just end, unfortunately: myth ends unfortunate.

Nerve wrecked you devote yourself to its end. 'Obviously', you become the protagonist, a "tragic hero," indispensable but in a mundane way (Kierkegaard 2021, 64). Mundane because everyone is as much a protagonist as you are. Mundane also because as main character you feel you were there only for the antagonist to have something to counteract in order to "demands tears" from the onlookers (Kierkegaard 2021, 66). Encore! Encore! Yet myth hails, siren for you; you do not just feel needed, but frankly required. Myth inscribes your life with meaning – deepening it like a wound – but dangerously "what is called reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying" (Camus 1991, 1). True to the mandatory expectation, you struggle against the end, but by struggling onwards, you write towards it.
The mythological structure renders the scene of your life into a stage set to go for tragedy. Indeed, it is given that your intentions are sound; you try your best to do good. Nevertheless, the end is nearing. Given the logic of narrative, your actions become scripted relative to the supposed mythological cataclysm: you know what to do against the conspiracy of impending doom – stop it! This prompt is given miraculously by common sense. This myth, your myth, any myth is a war on imagination, soldiered by your own phantasy, retained by frustration: for the time being, the end is near.

The immanent war that albeit the West must happen, de facto does not need to at all. The inevitable war is therefore a myth. To your mind, speciously, "[the] mythological world" appears "closer to consciousness than does the immediate reality" (Lukács 1971, 194). Myth has it that there is some possible scenario, at the verge of breaking out, in, or through precisely like a war breaks out, troops storm in, and blockades are broken through. Myth envisions an evocative background to your established sense of reality, mediating it by imposing some immanent threat. As a scene, often of tragic character, myth pleads your current stance to be a naïve contrapposto.[1] And so, myth claims you as much as me are far too relaxed in grounding reality, nonchalant even as we rest the weight of the world on one footing. Myth assertively nudges our pose into a tiptoeing anxious stance, since tragedy might, just might, realise itself. Poised, we warrant ourselves from the mythological threat by realising it – armament!

'War against war equals peace', the myth seems to propose; anxiousness is weaponised as neurosis. Neurosis is to be anxious to the degree of being prepared to 'just get it over with'. Fatalism thrives in neurosis. No matter your posture, 'we will fall'.

Myth avows a corrective fall, a deep drop into 'real' reality; truer than truth. It threatens our established reality to be a mere naïve delusion. Reality besieged as fantasy; disenchantment by enchantment. Belief in the myth means to apprehend that threat as a promise. Myth promises that the delusion from reality is 'reassuringly' exchanged for the neurosis of reality. Because it might not work out, myth luckily ensures you it will go wrong.

Mythologies as such are not pre-historically situated, as we are keen on thinking. Neither the Odyssey and all its tragic heroes, nor Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk at some time and date, are historical accounts: they are myths.

History – not to be mistaken with the past – is beautiful. Opposite to myth, history is poetry: it breaks the self-understanding of our own time apart as it warps meaning and thwarts logic by showing things can change. Therefore, "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (Benjamin 2015, 246). History does not invoke fear; rather, it offers us the unrealised dreams – the mémoires involontaire – of our predecessors as our own. Likewise, we do not fear the idea of living in a hunter-gatherer band, neither do we tremble at the notion of existing by chance in a pre-neolithic era, nor do we faint when imagining ourselves subsisting amongst noble savages.[2] We do not fear Pangaea, or a return to the Kalahari Basin, and to the furthest extreme, we neither fear devolution into some ancestral species, preceding the 'humanity' that we seem to have assumed.

The opposite is often temptingly true: such promise sounds rather relaxing; contrapposto. The myths that we do dread are rather a-historically situated, outside of time.

A-historical myths propose a state of nature, an absolute natural law. A law that inevitably must enforce itself. Strictly speaking, nature is that which cannot be changed. It is not a law, it is far stricter in the sense that it imposes on the possible the bounds of the impossible. It is best described with the dictum that everything that exists, by its mere existence, is natural: something unnatural is an oxymoron. It borders, so to speak, the outer edge of all that is. It caps the possible with the impossible. Formulated in inverse, nature is the point zero from which anything is possible at all. For example, nature necessitates all life to be carbon-based and averts silicon-based life-forms to phantasy. Situated in antonym to nature is history.

1 Contrapposto describes a relaxed stance. It is a term used in the study of art to denote a development of Ancient Greek sculpture around 500 BCE.

2 That is, those alleged 'savages' that opposite to popular opinion of the time do not wage war. In Rousseau's A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind (1755) he speculates the pre-historical human being – the one without Society – to be compassionate. To him historical evidence proves as much. Therefore, it is society that alienates us from our virtues and complements greed and fosters inequality.

History is the record of what can, in fact, change. Often against all odds. History teases the possible with immanent variability. In extension, we think of history and know the history of our assumed humanity as a record of past, bygone realities. Incongruent realities, unimaginably different from time to time and from one to another because history means, precisely, change. Change is not trivial; it cannot be minute, change must be novel. Without novelty, no history.

A-historical means to position something beyond history, and as such render it unchangeable, and meanwhile placing it in front of nature as if it were the frame onto which nature exists. The 'a-historical state of nature'-myth provides a pedantic ultimatum, corrective of any endeavours to transgress the strict limit of nature and inadvertently consider it changeable. Put differently, it determines what is possible and what is impossible, thereby limiting the scope of change: it becomes minute if not negligible. The novel is insulted by being called fashion, because just like fashion, it would circle back to the eternal recurrence of the same. However, irony has it that any 'state of nature'-myth, by being figured and assumed, already exists within the bounds of the possible: otherwise, it could not have been envisioned at all. We cannot reach our natural state, we cannot grasp beyond history into nature, nobody has ever shaken hands with the first human. History, we thus must pose, is the closest we'll ever get to nature, precisely by moving away from it, as time creeps on. Whenever "an historical element appears, it refers back to the natural element that passes away within it" (Adorno 1984, 120). However, the state of nature-myth oversteps its own premise of conditions of possibility, in order to propose what is in fact 'truly' possible. That is, it impossibly states the possible. Thereby it denotes not the impossible, but rather demarcates within the possible, and as such it prescribes whilst within the realm of the possible already, that which is ought to be regarded as impossible.



"Do not let us go back to a fictitious primordial condition […]. Such a primordial condition explains nothing; it merely pushes the question away into a grey nebulous distance." – Karl Marx, "Estranged Labour" in Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 844, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 67

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Of such state of nature myths there are many. Some of those have been promoted to ideologies and are executed in policy towards attempted realisation, just like capitalist economy is thought of as a natural law. However, to belief it to be true equates to have suffered brain damage – like a brain infarction can make it naturally impossible to talk – that renders impossible all that is beyond economy (and there is so much over there). Other myths have become normalised intuitions, unthought thoughts. For example, drawing on hunter-gatherers in an argument is historical: they existed, lived in a way, in a certain world. However, inferring any state of nature 'true truth' from it – truer than truth itself – like natural gender role, is a-historical. Such inference explains nothing, it just attempts to naturalise some present quirk; 'it is what it is'. It invokes the strand of fatalism present in the neurotics, or as Lukács has it:

> "For the individual, whether capitalist or proletarian, his environment, his social milieu (including Nature which is the theoretical reflection and projection of that milieu) must appear the servant of a brutal and senseless fate which is eternally alien to him. This world can only be understood by means of a theory which postulates 'eternal laws of nature'.
>
> Such a theory endows the world with a rationality alien to man and human action can neither penetrate nor influence the world if man takes up a purely contemplative and fatalistic stance." – Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), p. 38

The most vulgar and pervasive state of nature myth, replicated ad absurdum, is Thomas Hobbes' war of all against all. It naturalises that the human as a lone wolf – itself an oxymoron – which we thereby allegedly cannot do anything about (Hobbes 1994, 1). Consequently, he provides that therefore natural life must be terrifyingly "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1651, 78). Why so, Hobbes envisioned: since there is no idea of property, nor a state to guarantee ownership and protect it consequently. To him, human nature is horrendous because there is no natural property, because naturally, everything is no one's; there is no natural idea of ownership. Mythologically rendering it terror is a stifling embargo on all that is possible.

To warrant from this state of nature, Hobbes claims we jailbreak the prisoner's dilemma of everybody being each other's prime enemy and transfer all our warring potential onto an institution he terms Leviathan. Leviathan is often euphemistically referred to as 'the sovereign', but in fact it is a biblical name for a horrendous sea monster. Leviathan is a siren that warns us for one another in the most attractive way possible: by alluding to greed. Nobody does not want! Everybody that wants, wants to have! 'To have' is to secure want, fulfilled or unfulfilled. This monster proceeds by 'acquiring' the monopoly on violence to establish property as the ceasefire of the mythological war of all against all. Through a primary violence the commons were first stolen from everyone. Thereby it became property, whereby to steal it back became both theft and consequentially a crime to be violently punished.[3]

3 This process is termed by Marx 'primitive accumulation'. Examples are the British parliament-backed 'great enclosure' of the commons (often termed 'wastes') between 1750 and 1850 or any form of primordial theft like the American 'land grabbing' of that same period by US-settler colonialists or one can think of the 'stealing' of a woman's body when she engaged in marriage for the large part of the past centuries by which the husband 'owned' her. More modern examples are mining and drilling permits or the conquest for rare minerals on the bottoms of 'our' oceans.

This spectre of war – by figuring an a-historical myth as background – attempts to inhibit some part of the possible from another part of the possible. By suggesting the former part nature, and the latter beyond war or property to be a state of emergency. That is, the circumstance that is in active denial of that supposed nature. This state of exception beyond ownership, to Hobbes, is immanent war. This myth is largely believed, and its erudite profession is neurosis: to fear war to such an extent that one is prepared to generalise war as the organisation of the state, that is, to wage war in order to not wage a war of all against all. Alas, war against war is peace (?!).

> "[The] imperialist-minded businessman […] replaced the superstition of progress with the equally vulgar superstition of doom." – Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 144
>
> "[T]he unexplained and inexplicable facticity of bourgeois existence as it is here and now acquires the patina of an eternal law of nature or a cultural value enduring for all time." – Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), p. 157

- III -

"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight" (Benjamin 2015, 248). The agnostics, tempted but wary, already believe in the war myth. They just do not yet accept the threat the myth poses as a promise. The agnostics are anxious. To be anxious is to deprive oneself of possibilities, actively or reactively, and to see only the worst possibility in all that is possible. Anxiety, compared for example with fear, exists only as long as that which it is anxious for does not exist: it threatens existence. The neurotic, on the contrary, sees the worst possibility as the best of all possibilities. The neurotics are consequentially agnostics too, they belief in something unknown behind existence, behind everything known. However, they are of the fundamentalist strand: the unknown behind reality is to them the only truth. They live in non-synchrony with the present and "contradict the Now in a very peculiar way, awry, from the rear" (Bloch 1977, 22). In comparison to anxiety, neurosis exists only as long as that which it fears is realised in its fearing. Neurosis is easy, yet finite: it does what it fears, because it fears it. However, to remain anxious is a tremendous accomplishment because that which does not exist – like the war of all against all – must insist itself as a threat and as such must be kept in nonexistence. Anxiousness is infinite; it finds a hint without a signifier, feels a draught from a vacuum, hears an echo without origin. The partiture by which such myth threatens must infer from war-related instruments: symbols and signs that denote its absence presently, absence as presence. The siren announces the ascension of war, as if the messenger of Leviathan. If believed, the threat has been mythologised neurotically as a promise.

The siren – yet another mythological sea monster – is one of the most evocative figures to allude to neurosis found in writing throughout history. The siren signals an attractive warning, but is it attracting to the warning or to that which it warns of? Their call was encountered first – in the literary sense of the word – in a narrow strait surrounded by cliffs in a time beyond history, as our hero Odysseus sails his ship and crew towards Thrinacia.

The siren first figures in Homer's Odyssey, yet its recurrence ever since has rendered it a sort of warning for itself, that is to say, a cliché. Endlessly reproduced, however, it has not worn. Although reuse fades most things, the hail of seduction of that siren's call echoes stronger as the myth resonates through the habituated ravine of culture. The rock walls towering parallel to Odysseus' boat are unprecedented. Sailing on a river that erodes deeper than ever before. Erosion is the way that history wears away over time. But a history void of change always runs aground. Whereas water sands down, it also polishes up; it refines. The sirens on its shores sing the most sublime song: a promise of pleasure, known to be satisfied as pain when submitted to: "they demand the future as its price" (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 26). This is the pathos, the tenor of any use of sirens as a literary device: what sounds as a promise is in fact heard as a threat. As a mediation between the coincidence of the temptation of pleasure and the promise of pain, the siren is rhetorically best used to symbolise a threat. From Homer, Plato, Pliny the Elder, Dante, Adorno, through as many named, unnamed and forgotten authors historiography banishes to the mute plains yonder, the siren's call has dissonated into a distorted echo. The initial threat has started to become heard as a risk, which might as well be a chance, perceptively even a profit.
To the neurotic, it is a promise.

Historically, sirens are depicted as vultures with human heads.
Metaphorized as the natural threat, which is also inscribed into us humans, as it is all too easy to forget that we are natural to begin with (and to begin with only).
The chimeric and anthropomorphic appearance of the siren alludes to song, as they call to be seized. Like a wailing bird's song that seduces the listener to listen. Attentively, that is: not to investigate but to evade. Only hunters seek for the song just heard. Mythological knowledge has it that these sirens will not only murder on approach, but they also feed on their fresh prey. Hunter hunted. You see, the threat is a promise. Hence, we get silent when fearing danger, we mute when afraid, we make no sound when scared: it is to listen closely in order not to approach but to evade the threat. Yet, their song is so beautiful that the protagonist of this myth, just like the agnostics whom we have just discussed, fears abiding. Hearing cannot be unheard, hence Odysseus, the perseverant hero who was to sail beyond the sirens' colony, through the shadow of the high banks, ought himself to have his ears plugged. He must have understood their threat to be no risk, by far no chance! The call of the siren is a promise to be evaded, not to be indulged in. Odysseus' "cunning [...] is defiance made rational" (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 46).

Later, throughout its echoes in history, the figure of the siren started to appear no longer as a bird, but as a human, all too human. Above all, "the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence" (Kafka 1960, 249). Naked necks also, but not conceded by feathers, but rather by breasts, just as vagrantly naked as the rest of the human body. A turn so stark that it cannot be denied. The threat of death that is a promise is now figured precisely in the likeness of that which is to evade that sudden death: human. We are our own threat, the human seduced against the human, a war of all against all. The siren's renewed morphology now appeals visually, an image to be observed, seductive: it is midday as our mirror image is reflected on the polished walls of the narrow ravine.





However, these sirens are not erotic – as birds sheathed in feathers that stimulate careful observation – they are pornographic. They figure a phenotype of desire itself, bluntly given when taken, but here winner takes none: the winner loses. Eyes can be shut, with some effort, ears can be plugged, but no way can desire for bare fulfilment be annulled; it is futile. That is, at least to the greedy neurotic. If a threat is a promise to be desired, what is desired is death. The threat has waned to a mere risk, something one takes rather than fatefully undergoes if need be. Pathos of the threat polished up as ethos of a promise, as time and reuse rendered the image into something we can conjoin with: that which is warned for is precisely what we want. The neurotic accepts, no, the neurotic seizes the promise of death. The threat itself has become the risk, but to something not of something. No surprise that what contemporary sirens allegedly warn of seems precisely that which its trembling addressees want. Addicted to that which has not been provided, but which has remained promised, the siren calls out the atonement of the initial desire, but in reconciliation that equates penance. Why is reconciliation penance? Because it equates death. The threat is a promise. Indulgence is defiance made irrational.

First death, then satisfaction. We want to be satisfied so badly; we are prepared to die for it. This is neurosis since by dying, we can no longer be satisfied by what we have died for. The war that we fear, by the myth of the war of all against all, is the war that we want. The call of the siren warning us, is now perceived as an invitation.

Each first Monday of the month, 12:00 Dutch time, the sirens wail. That is, tomorrow, at the time of writing. Just a day beyond the weekend that separates it from the presentation of the new plans of the similarly new government (properly paraphrased as their investment/austerity programme). The sirens' threatening call has become the mythological promise: 19 billion will be invested in 'defence' – yet another oxymoron – which will be cut from healthcare and social security (denunciatory termed 'benefits' in proper English). The myth is realised: as we have learned to fear war to the extent that we wage it on what we allegedly protect from that war, by precisely indulging in war! Whether evasively termed 'congressionally authorised counteroffensive', 'special military action', or 'pre-emptive retaliatory de-escalation action', the sirens that will wail tomorrow, wail the dissonant truth of the neurotics. Millenia after its mythological conception, Odysseus' ship will run aground, tomorrow morning at 12:00.

Now, let us learn to abandon the ship of mythological cataclysm. As Bloch writes on utopia: "I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin" (Bloch 2000, 1).

Printing:

Print&Bind
Roman Biotop
creme (90 gr.)

Typefaces used:

body
Karrik regular

other
Sligoil Micro
Sligoil Micro Medium
Sligoil Micro Bold

Illustrations by:

Zoe Zimmer

Production by:

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Cover made by:

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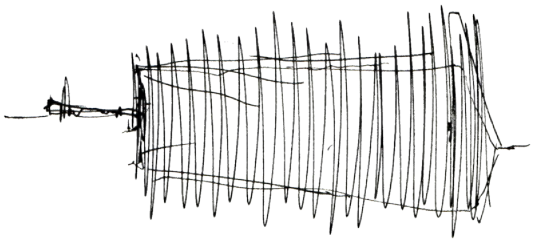
Zoe Zimmer
Marsha van leersum



Everything not saved, will be lost. ——————————— Nintendo WII menu screen