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Digitality, Cosmology and Mythology

Mateja Zidarić's Pleiades (Plejade, 2021)

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Digitality, the condition of living in a digital computerized culture, has transformed the immediate physical presence of the world around us. Their co-existence as flattened, virtual screen objects has changed our experience of physical objects as well as our understanding of their location in space and historical time. One could say the same thing about digitality that Levi-Strauss said about science in the seventeenth century, namely that it is "turning its back upon the world of the senses, the world we see, smell, taste, and perceive".[1] Through Google Earth, places and locations have been transformed into anonymous outlooks that move through our satellite-explored planet. The film *Pleiades* by Mateja Zidarić is set on the internet and in virtual settings of the Google program for the Moon and Space and its tool for viewing the night sky (Google Sky), as well as on other astronomy platforms. While many films that, like *Pleiades*, were shown at 25 FPS (the Zagreb Experimental Film Festival) were interested in the texture of film and analogue techniques of experimental filmmaking (such as 16mm or Super 8), this hybrid experimental video essay embraces the techniques of digital communication. Zidarić is part of the Zagreb Cinema Club that has a long and rich tradition of experimental film dating back to 1928, making it the oldest amateur club in South-Eastern Europe. From its early beginnings, the club was involved in using experimental amateur art to address aesthetic and political issues in a process that is avant-garde and often collaborative. Making the film by herself on her own personal computer, though, Mateja Zidarić resorts to online chats to create dialogue, while the background footage in her film is taken from multiple virtual sources – Google Earth, satellite images, as well as microscopic and ultrasound images of the human body.

The use of Google Earth and Google Sky in recent video art is an unprecedented venture in film in that it allows filmmakers to question both the idea of point of view in cinema and our relationship to space. In her film *Data*

Field, Alexandra Anikina used Google Earth to study the relationship between computer data fields and the field outside her grandparents' home in the Russian countryside, creating an uncanny link between our nostalgic attachment to local lands and satellite imagery. Mateja Zidarić's short film *Pleiades* sheds light on the mythological implications of our digital age and thereby explores the meaning we attach to planets, moons, stars, nebulae, galaxies, and craters. The film draws links between astronomy, digitality and our mythological interpretations of the cosmos. In the film, macrocosmic and microcosmic dimensions are superimposed, recreating multiple layers on the two-dimensional space that is the protagonist/filmmaker's screen. As society delves deeper into virtual zones, we distance ourselves from the ancient experience of awe for the stars. However, one could say the internet is nevertheless presented in a positive light in Mateja Zidarić's film, which reveals it to be a powerful tool for understanding the interrelations between space and human questioning.

The film takes the form of a conversation between two women on an online chat platform – an anonymous female interlocutor, and the filmmaker, whose face we can see and who thus gradually evolves into the film's protagonist. They start their conversation by talking about and measuring lunar craters, discussing the science behind their creation, as well as chatting about more everyday problems of life. In parallel, the filmmaker intersperses slow-motion lunar satellite footage. We then see an image of ultrasound imaging (sonography), the technology that uses high-frequency sound waves to look inside the human body for clinical purposes – it is most likely the image of female breasts, since the filmmaker has learned that she has developed lumps in them. Zidarić explains in an interview that the first use of ultrasound for clinical purposes – ultrasound being a technique used to image the inside of the body – and the first physical exploration of the Moon in 1959, occurred almost at the same time (prior to 1959, the only available means of space exploration had been telescopic observation from Earth). Later in the film the ultrasound imagery is said to remind one of the women of a Rorschach psychiatric test. One of the main ideas of the film is to interlace the coincidence between the clinical body, both physical and mental, and astronomical space.

The appropriation of post-internet art by women artists addressing women issues calls to mind how feminist contemporary art has explored and commented on the internet's increasingly profound effects on society. For example, the 'Computer Grrrls' exhibition at the Gaité Lyrique in Paris 2019 documented the central role of women for the development of computers and the internet. In her *Untold Story of The Women Who Made The Internet* (2017), Claire L. Evans spoke about "the code writing poetesses" that were internet pioneers. *Pleiades* can be positioned within this cyber-feminist movement. The internet is inherently gendered, with male and female users developing different relationships to it. The women characters in the film are talking about

and google-searching specifically female subjects, notably when the filmmaker's breast lumps are mentioned. It is also noteworthy that the title-lending Pleiades are female characters from Greek mythology. While web-surfing on Wikipedia pages, the filmmaker also draws our attention to our gender-biased relationship to science. She scrolls through Wikipedia pages of different women mathematicians and astronomers from Antiquity to 19th century Russia that have been forgotten**,** such as Neoplatonist astronomer Hypatia; Sofya Vasilyevna Kovalevskaya, born in 1850 in the Russian Empire, a mathematical pioneer and the first woman to obtain a doctorate; and Mary Somerville, born in 1780, a polymath who was known for being the first female Honorary Member of the British Royal Astronomical Society. Many of these women were pioneer theorists whose science has often been appropriated by men. Zidarić reminds us in an interview that science and thought are social too, but that they should still be thought of as phenomena of the human mind beyond gender biases.

In the second part of the film, stars are related to a recent event: the already mentioned lumps that the filmmaker has recently developed in her breast. The protagonist demonstrates how black-and-white footage of the surface of the moon resembles the ultrasound imagery of the lumps. Amusingly, she is looking for a nickname for seven of her lumps and searches through the NASA Catalog of Lunar Nomenclature to find one. The filmmaker finally decides to call her lumps by the title-lending name "Pleiades"*,* as if the lumps in her body were determined by lucky or unlucky stars. Here, a microcosm is thought of as an area of the mind, not just the body. The emphasis on knowledge and on obsessing over such an event (the development of a lump) in the protagonist's mind is related to her fascination with stars. Moreover, the film concentrates on the origin of rather than cures for the lump – it wonders where the lump originates, and how malignant it is. By constantly parallelizing the cosmos and the body, it is as if the protagonist/filmmaker were looking for some kind of cosmological meaning rather than looking for the scientific solution to its cure. This knowledge process from the universal to the particular is understood as part of the process of myth construction in anthropology. In *The Savage Mind*, structural anthropologist Claude-Levi Strauss explains that the creation of a myth is a process that departs from a common structure – that is from the universal – to construct an event or particular story, whereas in producing an artwork artists arguably move from the contingency of an event to construct a universally relatable common meaning and structure. This film for example unlocks a metaphysical layer of meaning by retelling a specific, fairly everyday event. According to Levi-Strauss, to many cultures a myth tells stories whose metaphysical source was pre-existent in a common structure of the human mind, that is in the rules of a community or our common perception of the universe. The film explores how our observation of the universe is incorporated into the construction of mythopoieses that are common to different cultures. The universal understanding of cosmic cycles and their mythological interpretation can be used to read the microscopic particular event that is a

lump in the breast, rather than speculating about it from a scientific standpoint.

The film eventually starts to investigate the nature of mythology more generally. Having different windows open on the screen creates layers that evoke different interlacing meanings: the cosmos, the human body, everyday life, mythology, famous events in the history of women in astronomy. The Pleiades, we learn from the protagonist's Wikipedia searches, also known as "The Seven Sisters", are the star cluster nearest to the Earth and can thus reveal themselves to the naked eye at night. Its stars were formed around 100 million years ago, and they have been important in many civilizations around the Earth since antiquity (from the Indigenous Australians and the Persians, to the Arabs, Aztecs and Catholics). The Ancient Egyptians used the Pleiades for the Calender of Lucky and Unlucky Days. In Greek mythology, the Pleiades are the companions of Artemis, the seven daughters of the titan Atlas and the nymph Pleone (Zeus transformed the daughters into stars to comfort their father after Orion began pursuing them).

Mythology, although adopting fiction, can be defined as a set of stories or a body of knowledge that explains the causes of the world, the reasons behind natural forces and phenomena, and cultural developments of a particular people. The filmmaker was inspired by Joseph Campbell's concept of "monomyth" – the theory that sees all mythological narratives as variations of a single great story. It claims that common patterns exist beneath the narrative elements of most great myths, regardless of their origin or time of creation. Also, these myths draw us towards our desires of transcendence and awe at being confronted with the mystery of the universe that cannot be captured in words or images. Campbell says that "mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of reason and coercion […] The first function of mythology is to reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe *as it is*."[2] For both Campbell and the filmmaker of *Pleiades*, myths have a cosmological function, they are a form of "proto-science" in that they provide certain explanations of cosmic cycles.

Mythology was transmitted orally throughout history, but the film shows that nowadays our common knowledge comes mainly from digital civilization. Even the story of the Pleiades is mainly transmitted via digital search engines. Our mystification of constellations and the awe that is provoked by our looking at them do not require looking at the sky itself through telescopes, as they are now rendered possible through Google Sky. The knowledge available on online encyclopedias like Wikipedia, Britannica, or Encyclopedia Mythica, an internet encyclopedia on mythology, folklore, and religion, is shared by a community of users of the World Wide Web. Global individuals no longer inherit and transmit knowledge from their ancestors in a specific community that is united by their beliefs, nor do they gather it by observing their environment. Rather, users are freely filling the gaps in their knowledge through a decentralized, global and

constantly available data platform – the internet. The network interconnects users in a decentralized nonmaterial community that raises the question of the perennity of the term mythology. Is mythology still relevant in the global, Westernized, late capitalistic world, without it being a form of postmodern nostalgia? Can the internet be understood as a form of mythology? Movies, television, computer games, comics, and graphic novels all resort to mythological stories. However, it seems that mythology is rapidly changing. Perhaps what could be said with this film is that the common knowledge of peoples can be archived and found on networks that co-create a sense of virtual global community that does, however, detach itself from the ritualistic archaic aura of the oral beginnings of myth transmission.

Furthermore, the film demonstrates the dangers and joys of how one can both lose and find oneself on the internet. The whole conversation between the two women in the film is built on associations and coincidences that are created by and through the World Wide Web. The importance of the number seven in the film is an example of this associative process: the nine brightest stars of the Pleiades constellation are named after the Seven Sisters of Greek Mythology (Sterope, Merope, Electra, Maia, Taygeta, Celaeno, Alcyone) and their parents, Atlas and Pleione. While Google searching for the significance of the number seven, the protagonists find out that the number has an important role in different visions of the world: there are seven days of the week; seven phases of the moon; according to Pythatgoras, the number seven is made up of the spiritual number three and the physical number four; in China, seven defines the various stages of a woman's lives; seven days play a central role in the creation myth of the Bible as well in other popular creation myths; and so on. Ironically, in the film, finding out about these symbolic connections is again made possible by surfing the web. The World Wide Web is seen as a place where common structures, symbolisms, meanings, and coincidences can unite on a single platform, somewhat confirming Campbell's theory of the monomyth, whereby all myths have a common structure. In addition, in the film mathematics and symbolism join forces to bring science and mythology together. Unlike the romantic tradition of dividing science and poetry, mathematics here acquire a poetic value – not so much as the constraint on language that it is when we count and codify the structure of verses and rhyme in poetry, but rather in the way numbers possess a symbolic and mythological significance that goes beyond the abstract nature of numbers as arithmetical values.

The film closes on the notion that the internet and computerized imagery are also mythological ways of understanding the world and hence alternatives to ancestral or scientific knowledge. Although it detaches us from the materiality of the universe, digital technology in the film helps us understand the associations and interrelations between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, thereby co-creating another form of awe. Mateja Zidarić succeeds in illustrating how our humanity is inspired by a contemporary sense of awe, notably awe at

the infinite knowledge of the world that can be acquired thanks to data today. Put differently, it is an awe at a flattened but precise access to the cosmos that is available in one click. In a structuralist cyber-feminist move, the film also treats the internet as a tool for women to cure their bodies, help understand their origins and the associations that exist within our global community, and thereby begin to create a new common structure.

References

1. Claude Levi-Strauss, Myth and Meaning, Routledge, 2001; p. 1.
2. Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God, vol. 4: Creative Mythology (New York: Viking, 1965); p. 4.