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Lule, Jack - *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*, The Guilford Press, New York, 2001 ISBN: (Paperback) 9781572306066

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Perhaps the most fervent issue taken with any discussion of the craft of contemporary journalism, is the vital distinction between fact and fiction. Journalists report facts and convey information, storytellers tell stories and spin yarns. Yet there has been a growing tendency in journalistic academia to explore the storytelling functions and conventions of the news. Over a decade ago, Jack Lule released a compelling exploration of the mythological function of news in *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (2001), styling journalists as modern day storytellers. It is an intriguing idea that has since spawned endless discussion, building on the ideas of Barthes and Campbell and Eliade, that proposes news to be the primary vehicle of myth today. Although published more than a decade ago, the book encouraged so much exploration of news in terms of its relationship with myth, that it warrants revisiting and reviewing.

Lule's thesis rests on the idea that news and journalism is the latest in the ancient and quintessential human art of storytelling. He asserts that humans have always told stories, and that these stories have always been used to confirm dominant social norms, group ideas and beliefs. They have been used to condemn transgressions and to provide reason and reassurance to life's biggest questions. Lule charges journalists and editors with the modern role of storyteller, placing news at the centre of modern day myth making and seeing it as fulfilling the same social function. He says:

“ We can recognise in news stories the siren song of myth, ... These news stories offer more than a retelling of common story forms. These news stories offer sacred, societal narratives with shared values and beliefs, with lessons and themes, and with exemplary models that instruct and inform. They are offering myths (p.18). ”

Lule also pushes his analysis of news beyond notions of bias and objectivity, truth and fiction to identify the power presence of 'eternal stories' that are at work in everyday news. He identifies seven 'master myths' which have been told since humans started telling stories, and are still told today in the format of news: The Victim, The Scapegoat, The Hero, The Good Mother, The Trickster, The Other World and The Flood. He then methodically presents seven case studies as examples of where to find these myths in the news and cleverly assigns different 'mega-myths' to different styles of news. In the human-interest story he finds the myth of the Good Mother; coverage of natural disasters are extensions of the myth of The Flood; sports stories project Campbell's Hero's Journey. They are, the author insists 'primordial stories that have guided human storytelling for ages. And they guide the news stories of today.' (p. 22)

Lule makes a compelling argument. Many theorist and commentators have questioned and explored the motivations behind news-makers when shaping raw facts and information into stories. Michael Schudson once wrote that while news isn't fictional, it is conventional (1982, p.99). It is accepted that news serves a social function, and that this function can range anywhere from a mouthpiece of the powerful to a site of resistance and critique of authority.

Lule offers an insightful and highly plausible explanation that many of the social roles assigned to news are identical to those fulfilled by myths and storytelling. He runs with Kenneth Burke's assertion that our world exist in terms of social order, a certain way of doing things, rather than a fixed, homogenous 'society'. Lule's view of news fits in with Burke's model. 'Life and social order are understood in terms of drama ... in this model, a primary role of news is to enact social dramas that *sustain social order*' [his italics] (p.36).

It is an elegant idea, and a skilfully thorough analysis. Lule dutifully recognises that in order for his thesis to be accepted and taken into modern news commentary, that real life examples need to be found in daily news on a daily basis. This seems to have only occurred to Lule incidentally:

“ I was sometimes taken aback when an engaged listener would nod, hand me a newspaper and say: 'Show me!' But of course. If news is myth, then we should be able to consistently find myths in the pages of the newspaper (pp.21-2). ”

Challenge accepted, it would seem. Lule steadily moves through each of his myths, establishing characteristics and locating them in the news coverage of seven events, mostly in *The New York Times*. He also takes each case study as an opportunity to make astute observations on what he sees as a crisis facing journalism in the power vacuum of the Cold War. His observations are sprawling, covering hard news, international commentary, sports journalism, human interest stories, profiles, even meta media commentary – the media commenting on the media.

This book is thoroughly researched and well argued, although its conclusion can verge on the outdated and irrelevant. Lule's musings on the way that US news agencies will structure and define international news in the new post-Cold War global village seem to miss the mark when viewed in hindsight. Whilst this is mostly due to the fact that very few could predict the way news production would change through the first decade of the 21st century, this chapter is also indicative of a deeper problem with this book. Lule bravely offers his conceptualisation of news as myth as not only a new way to analyse mass communication but as a solution to many problems facing media industry, and society at large. He argues that treating news as myth could solve a wide range of complex and multi-faceted problems facing the news industry at the time of writing, some of which have become obsolete and some of which have become increasingly complicated and problematic since the 2001 publication.

But when assessing whether or not a news story fits in with a myth archetype, Lule often brings along his own criteria. For example, in his exploration of the news coverage of Mike Tyson's rape trial, he asserts that the news media set out to cast Tyson as the mythical Trickster, and that this casting was racially charged. The Trickster, he asserts, was a grotesque, animal figure not in control of his actions, and completely at the mercy of his carnal and primal urges. He is a victim, subject to the unfair and cruel scorn of a society that values beauty, intelligence, and refinement. After establishing this portrayal of the Trickster, Lule's analysis of the coverage of Tyson during his trial seems to tick all the Trickster boxes.

He then moves on to draw conclusions about implicit racism in the media reflected by this case. But if one looks almost anywhere for definitions of the Trickster archetype, Tyson's character that Lule argues was written by the news media, seems to fall short. Joseph Campbell, for example, described the Trickster as being grotesque and deformed yes, but also as cunning, sly and often able to outsmart those who ridiculed and tormented him. He breaks societal rules, rewrites right and wrong and establishes his own morality. In denying Tyson these quintessential Trickster characteristics, Lule falls short of any kind of empirical evidence supporting his Trickster Tyson claim. If the reader has any prior knowledge of the mythical structures Lule asserts are present in his news they may find several shortcomings. Furthermore, these characteristics would seem obvious choices for a stereotypical portrayal of a rapist, and yet Lule chooses to instead examine the implicit racism in any reportage that paints a person of colour as savage or animalistic. The omission of the obvious gender politics and portrayal of women at play, whilst not criminal, is hard to see past to his point about the presence of archetypal characters utilised by the press when covering stories that deal with issues of race.

But this does not mean that his observations on news conventions and narrative forms are not astute and relevant. The issue arises only when Lule repeats attempts not just to attribute these conventions to mythical forces at play on the newsmaker, but to offer news-as-myth as a theoretical tool, ready to take to new forms of news analysis, commentary and academia. 'Reporters, editors, sources and readers draw from a large, though limited range of fundamental sorties to portray and understand events' (p.36) he asserts. This is often done at the expense of other factors that influence narrative conventions and social functions of the news – market pressures, for example, are given little to no attention, nor are ideological, economic or political agendas of publications or their stakeholders. Lule seems to assume that news conventions are decided in their entirety by journalists themselves, or sometimes editors.

For all its faults, *Daily News, Eternal Stories* presents an intriguing and necessarily refreshing take on the influential factors at work in the production of news, as well as its complex yet vital social roles. The book was

not written with the intent of being subject to academic rigour or peer review, but rather to capture the attention of a wider, news-consuming audience who are 'outside of ivory-covered towers'.

Perhaps Lule's ideas might hold more water when allowed the space and criticism afforded to a more thorough analysis. But it has spurred others on to take his preliminary smashing together of news and myth and produce new and consistently refreshing takes on the news-academics landscape, which, as Lule rightly says, remains in crisis.

About the reviewer

Eloise Florence is a journalist and an Honours student at RMIT University, Australia. She is currently researching the relationship between news and myth and the way they help constitute national consciousness.