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From (French) Automobile to (Beninois) Agbo: Mythology, Modernity and *Divine Carcasse*

What happens to mythology, both theoretically and practically, when it circulates from large European cities to African villages? How does European mythology change when confronted with an unfamiliar landscape? How do cultural markers (continue to) signify meaning in foreign situations? The 1998 film *Divine Carcasse*¹ by Dominique Loreau follows a car as it moves from Cotonou (Benin), to the outskirts of Cotonou, and on to the village of Ouassou, changing from being a mode of private transportation to a taxicab to the statue of an ancestral divinity. Through examining issues of mythology, commodities, fetishes, language and the “afterlife,” present in the works of major European critics of modernity and mythology as well as in this particular film, I examine how mythologies are forced to modify themselves. Critical changes and questions concerning the practice of mythology both in Europe and in Africa interweave among major problems concerning the complexities of urban and non-urban myth.

I put the work of Louis Aragon, Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes into dialogue with the film, *Divine Carcasse*. An in-depth reading of mythology in Benjamin

and Barthes would be much too large a project; thus, instead, I firmly ground their theories in the primary text of the film. *Divine Carcasse* explores what happens when these theoretical European ideas of mythology are moved to an African setting and why that becomes such a productive move. Questions of urban cityscapes and the growing difficulties in conceiving of them, along with the option of movement away from the urban, engage the thought of Rem Koolhaas toward the end of this discussion. What happens when a European urban mythology is confronted with the African village?

The film *Divine Carcasse* was produced in 1998 as a joint production between Belgium and Benin. The “main character” of the film is a car, a 1955 Peugeot, which in the opening shot disembarks from a boat into Benin. The film has been described on the California Newsreel website as “an unusual hybrid, a half fictional, half ethnographic film. It is a study in cultural contrast, between a desacralized materialistic European view of reality and an animist, pre-industrial African one.”² This work is a fascinating study of ideas of commercialisation, commodities, the fetish and individual/community dynamics.

Once the car comes into the harbour and is taken off the boat, it is picked up by Simon, the European expatriate for whom it was imported. He then drives it home to his French community, the members of which deride him for having such an old car. When the car breaks down one time too many, Simon finds a fetish object in the motor and accuses Joseph, a Beninois who works around his house, of putting it there. Fed up with car troubles, Simon gives the car to Joseph, who brings it to his home on the outskirts of Cotonou. When Joseph mentions that the French call such a car, because of its advanced age, an “ancestor,” a friend of his becomes incensed and argues that it is wrong to call a car an ancestor; it is not possible to call a *machine* an ancestor. Joseph turns the car into a

taxi and attempts to earn money from his new possession. After troubles of his own with the car, Joseph returns to his employment at Simon's and explains to him that he was absent from work since he went to a fetishist who told him to make peace with an ancestor, a maternal uncle who was angry with him. Joseph abandons the car at a mechanic's garage. It is put up on blocks and scavenged—tyres are removed, car doors, the hood, engine parts, etc. Eventually, it becomes evident to the viewer that the car is being used for parts in order to create something entirely different; the car takes shape into an ancestor statue. The sculptor of the statue meets with four men who have commissioned the statue to be a representation of the divinity Agbo. The statue is then taken by canoe to a remote village where it becomes accepted in a festival by means of a song sung by the village, whereupon it takes part in a religious ceremony in its new form.

Urban Mythologies and the Voodoo Fetish

In this film, myth emanates from the city and thus it begins an exploration into myth with the major commercial city of Benin: Cotonou. Even before the film brings the viewer there, however, the urban mythological is present. The car comes from France; it is an export. This machine was produced in an urban technologised setting, implied by the automobile's status as a French import.

Louis Aragon, in his 1926 text *Le paysan de Paris*³ proposes the creation of a modern mythology that takes into consideration the urban landscape—buildings, posters, and man-made institutions. He suggests supplanting any earlier mythology that was based in nature with this more modern one. He walks through the city and is struck by the

imagery and illusion he encounters in his everyday life, his modern mythology.

Modernity in this understanding requires and creates its own mythology.

However, modernity also is explicitly invested in the idea of exposing mythology as false. Immanuel Kant, the paradigmatic figure of modernism, writes that he wants all men to be “liberated from [others’] tutelage” in his famous “What is Enlightenment?” essay.⁴ After being released from tutelage—especially that of religion and mythology, men are able to use their intellects freely and judiciously.

Aragon elaborates upon the idea of a modern mythology throughout his book. He walks through the city and is prompted towards revelations on imagery, illusion, mythology and the urban. The new urban mythology has the capacity to entirely supplant older, nature-based myths. Aragon does not quarrel with the fact that there may be a mythology in modernity. For him, it is evident simply from walking through the city that mythology exists. The modern myths have the same role and the same purpose as the myths based on nature, but, critically, man-made objects inspire them. This idea sets up a space for an understanding of mythology under modernity—a mythology that works with the products of modernity.

The car in *Divine Carcasse* is made into a sort of fetish from the very moment it is taken off the boat. Beninois men covet the car as soon as they see it and attempt to sway the importer into selling it to them, although he refuses to do so. The car is immediately transformed into a “fetish,” understood as an object to which some value or desire becomes attached.

For Benjamin, mythology emanates from commodity culture. In “Paris, Capital of the 19th Century,” myth is directly linked to the commodity, or, more specifically, to the

fetishizing of the commodity. Around these specific products, mythology arises in a way comparable to how myth springs out of the urban landscape for Aragon. For both, mythology is linked to the everyday and to the city from which they wrote. Similarly to Aragon, Benjamin highlights that it is because of the changing society—represented in Aragon by the modern cityscape and in Benjamin as cultural product—that new mythology can exist.

However, Benjamin does not agree entirely with Aragon’s conception of myth. He is not content simply to remark upon the existence of myth. Benjamin instead wants to shatter the complacency that allows for it. Aragon simply remarks that it exists, how and why. Michael Hollington, in his essay “Benjamin, Fourier, Barthes” included in *“With the Sharpened Axe of Reason:” Approaches to Benjamin*, claims that “though he admired Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris*, Benjamin distances himself from its ‘mythical’ approach to the arcade: his own project is to serve as a transition or awakening out of the sleep of capitalist modernity and commodity fetishism.”⁵ Even though Aragon had first proposed this urban idea of mythology, Benjamin wants to push it further in order to examine how one might escape myth, and, indeed, what one would then find. To further explain his understanding, Benjamin writes in *Konvolut*:

whereas Aragon persistently remains in the realm of dreams, here it is a question of finding the constellation of awakening. While an impressionistic element lingers on in Aragon (‘mythology’)...what matters here is the dissolution of ‘mythology’ into the space of history. Of course, that can only happen through the awakening of a knowledge not yet conscious of what has gone before.⁶

It is this existence of the dream world, created by commodity culture, that creates room for mythology. In “Paris, Capital of the 19th Century,” Benjamin discusses more fully this dream world. He claims that the arcades of Paris are also part of this dream world—

they are a prime example of the old mixing with the new. Benjamin writes, “each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives towards the moment of waking.”⁷ Thus, this dreaming and this goal of waking are linked to history as a process that continually happens and can be a connection between different epochs.

On a different level, this fetishizing happens in Benin, a centre for voodoo worship that relies extensively upon fetishes in religious practice. *The Historical Dictionary of Benin* defines voodoo as

Various ancestral and spirit cults, deities and fetishes encompassing cosmological beliefs and myths.... In 1993 it was estimated that 62 percent of Beninois practice vodun, and during February 8-18 of that year the First International Festival of Vodun Art and Culture took place in Ouidah..., opened by President Nicéphore Soblo....⁸

Creating a fetish out of a commodity resonates doubly within Beninois culture. The idea of voodoo as a concept that incorporates spirituality and everyday life in Benin, the setting of the film, brings the fetish out of the theoretical plane and into the practice of everyday life.

Waking and the Afterlife

As Benjamin sought to push society toward wakefulness and therefore out of mythology, Loreau, the filmmaker, seems to desire the same thing. Soon after the film begins, Simon, the first owner of the car, prepares a lesson about Plato’s cave allegory. He is depicted working while a voice-over reads aloud what he writes. The voice states:

Leçon de 5 fevrier:
Platon divise le monde en 2. Le monde des senses: tout est ephemère. Le monde des idées éternels. Connaissance est du monde des idées. Il faut imaginer les hommes, prisonniers au fond du caverne, assis le dos à lumière, condamnés à ne voir que le mur devant eux.⁹

Using Plato's conception that knowledge is obscured can easily mirror what Benjamin proposes in terms of how mythology covers over objects. Benjamin wants people to rouse themselves awake and become aware of mythology much in the same way that Plato uses the cave allegory to show how people understand ideas as they are presented to them. Plato's cave allegory deals with images and how what is behind imagery must be sought in order to understand reality clearly. Loreau's use of Plato's cave allegory alludes to the existence of a filter between the imagery and reality, where perception and mythology can be read into the example.

One route that Benjamin proposes as a way in which to break free of mythology and the dream world is through the examination of the "afterlife" of a commodity. The "afterlife" is what occurs once a commodity has become outdated. Graeme Gilloch offers a definition of this stage claiming:

The modern reveals itself as ruin. This notion of ruination is rooted in a recognition of the importance of an object's 'afterlife.' For Benjamin, the truth of an object is only discernible when it is on the point of oblivion...¹⁰

An object must be taken out of its context in order to have its "truth" exposed. Once this truth of the object is exposed, the myth that surrounds it has also been exposed. It is thus important to re-examine all things in order to explore how their contexts give them meaning. The historical forces that act on the object, which allow for the particularity of the commodity, need to be taken apart in order to see more clearly how the object operates. Thus, myth springs up around history and the two work together to create meaning for objects in the dream world. The "afterlife," in Benjamin's conception of it, removes these forces of myth and history, and allows for a clearer understanding of the commodity.

Benjamin's "afterlife" of the commodity is vital to keep in mind while studying this film. The afterlife is what happens to the Peugeot once it has been taken out of its context. In this film, it is quite literally demolished—stripped and taken apart—and this process shows the removal of contextualisation. The car can no longer be seen in the same way; its function is entirely different. The Peugeot has been transformed into a divinity statue. Loreau depicts another passage over water, symbolically showing the beginning of another new life, as was meant in the opening shots when the car came across the ocean from France. Once the car is taken out of its environment, according to Benjamin it has been removed from its mythology and its true value is visible. Its "true" (à la Benjamin) value, then, would be as a participant in the mythology of the village, in the form of the god Agbo because the mythology surrounding the car has been disenchanted. The car severs itself from the history that it was attached to, a history of commodification and capitalism, and becomes linked to a different history altogether. No longer a form of physical transportation, it perhaps creates a spiritual transport for those who believe in the divinity Agbo. Interestingly, this transformation and transplanting of histories shows that nothing can actually escape the ties of history. A new history would seem always to supplant the old.

The car works in a variety of ways with Benjamin's conception of mythology and the afterlife. Fetishizing and removing a commodity from its context are profitable and the film aptly illustrates those ideas. However, mythology is never disenchanted in the film. Rather, more specifically, as one mythology is disenchanted, another is proposed. Myth is never denied. Thus, on a basic level, some of Benjamin's ideas about mythology

and modernity are well illustrated, but the film would claim that, in a village, the goal of destroying myth is impossible.

Language and Automotive Mythologies

Roland Barthes shifts the focus of mythology to how it works in relation to language. Barthes's conception is linked to structuralism and Saussurean semiology, although he spins a different take on them. As Jean-Michel Rabaté explains, “myth [for Barthes] is made up of the three Saussurean components—signifier, signified and sign—but it is a secondary system in which what is a sign in the first system becomes a signifier.”¹¹

Language is deeply implicated in the process of mythopoesis. In describing the larger questions of Barthes's idea of mythology, Alvin Lee claims:

In *Mythologies* (1957) [Barthes] examines the ‘myths’ or cultural artefacts of French mass culture, including writing, sports, film, advertising and food. Regarding language not as a transparent vehicle of communication but as a means of repression by the bourgeoisie, Barthes argues that language enforces a certain ideology.¹²

Thus, mythology is created by language and imbued with popular culture—commodities, entertainment, everyday life. The way out of this idea of myth is through a close examination of the language of a text, in which the reader must attempt to read against the grain in order to expose the mythology latent in language.¹³

So, what precisely is a myth, according to Barthes? He states in *Mythologies* that “on voit par là que le mythe ne saurait être un objet, un concept ou une idée, c’est un mode de signification, c’est une forme.”¹⁴ Mythology, then, is the *way* in which something is communicated, the *way* that language signifies. It cannot be reduced simply to an object or an idea. Myth is deeply invested in everything that is affected by language.

What does mythology need? First, it needs a person on whom to work. Barthes claims

Le mythe a un caractère impératif, interpellatoire: parti d'un concept historique, surgi directement de la contingence (une classe de latin, l'Empire menacé), c'est moi qu'il vient chercher: il est tourné vers moi, je subis sa force intentionnelle, il me somme de recevoir son ambiguïté expansive.¹⁵

Thus, myth needs the person who is uttering the language to be there. It needs to work on someone. It interpellates. Language that can have different or at least ambiguous meanings must have a person who is able to understand, consciously or subconsciously, those variations in meaning. Otherwise, mythology will not work. Mythology requires subjects; it commands them.

As also alluded to in the quotation above, mythology needs history. It is contingent. History causes change in the understanding of words and prompts the creation of neologisms, all of which add to the concept of a mythology of language. There is a past, present and future of language and in the way that language is comprehended. Mythology is created through the different ways in which history produces meaning for language and the genealogy of a word's usage is critical in understanding its mythology.

Barthes brings mythology to the everyday and explains how everyday things acquire a mythology. In the article "La Voiture: projection de l'ego," he focuses on the car and the sort of mythology that has enveloped automobiles. The car has an ambiguous position in French culture: it is a luxury item, but already a banal one. This dual status opens up room for a mythology of the car. Barthes writes:

L'automobile, semble-t-il, est arrivée au dernier moment de cet itinéraire, on lutte pour elle, pour l'acheter, pour l'entretenir (d'où l'acuité de la

conscience qu'elle provoque), mais déjà banale, il suffirait de peu pour qu'elle devienne insignifiante (il n'y a aucune mythologie du réfrigérateur en Amérique). Comme ce n'est pas encore le cas, il reste dans l'automobile française des traces mythique...¹⁶

The car, with its dual placement in society, holds on to a mythological status as something that is difficult to obtain but nevertheless commonplace. Barthes also mentions that if someone speaks about his car, or his succession of cars, he is actually giving away a significant amount of knowledge about himself, his views on life and his country.¹⁷ How people speak about cars, the discourse that enshrouds them, all enter into a mythology of automobiles.

Barthes focuses on mythology as it relates to language. History is critical, as it was for Benjamin. Although the relationship between history and mythology is complicated and tricky, the two concepts work together—although not always on an equal footing in that myth uses history. Importantly, both Benjamin and Barthes want people to realise that the mythology is there. Once this realisation occurs, for Benjamin, the spell (or enchantment) of mythology will be broken, or, for Barthes, the ways in which language relates to a person will be brought to the forefront.

Divine Carcasse demonstrates a significant interest in language and how language functions. When Joseph brings the car newly given to him by Simon to his home and his Beninois neighbours gather around, Loreau depicts an interesting conversation that illustrates preoccupation with language. Dialogue takes place between Joseph (J) and an unnamed Beninois (B) and is as follows:

J: Do you know what they call a car like this in France? An ancestor!
 B: An ancestor! How can you call a car an ancestor?
 J: That's what the French call it!

B: We can't call it that. Here we have our own ancestors who protect and guide us. It can't be our protecting god. It's nothing but an old car.... You can't call a living object an ancestor.

There is an interesting play with the word *ancêtre* in this conversation. This mythology of the word "ancestor" and/or genealogy is rejected by the Beninois. Joseph presents the idea of the slang term with amazement and humour, but the villager is actively opposed to such an interpretation and concludes that this mythology will not work within his specific culture. Critically, cultural specificity is a barrier to mythology's understanding. What works as mythology in France does not work in Benin. Even within the same language, linguistic, slang differences highlight how much cultures participate in their own mythopoesis and how a myth produced can only work within that particular society.

Further, Barthes claims in *Mythologies* that myth "transform[e] un sens en forme."¹⁸ Change from a sense (as conveyed by a word) into a form is precisely the journey that the Peugeot follows over the course of the film. The car travels from having the sense of an ancestor to actually being an ancestor. In this way, the car would seem to be fully participating in mythology and taking on mythological characteristics. However, I must emphasise that Barthes did not necessarily foresee in this passage such a change as the one that the car travels. The two mythologies of bourgeois capitalism and the African village are not the same and should not be layered on top of each other as the same. But, despite these differences, through this transformation, the car leaves behind the cultural specificities of language and history. Instead of being linked to language, which is always-already related to a particular culture, the car becomes a thing, seemingly recognisable as such in every culture. However, the ways in which French and Beninois culture regard the car transmuted into divinity are still very different. Although this

metamorphosis passes from language into form, cultural ties are still present and demand an understanding of that form.

So, what conclusions for the film can be drawn after reading it in terms of Barthes's idea of mythology? *Divine Carcasse* demonstrates one way Barthes' transformation of sense into form can take place through the car's evolution from automobile to Agbo. The film also shows how language can be associated with history in the scene between Joseph and the Beninois who rejects the term "ancestor" for a car. That particular short scene deftly illustrates how language can have its sense changed by time and culture.

I assert that it is no coincidence that it is a car that can showcase this ability of transformation. As Barthes wrote in "La Voiture: projection de l'ego," "ce n'est plus bientôt, peut-être, une mythologie de l'automobile qu'il faudra écrire: c'est une mythologie de la conduite."¹⁹ The ability to travel, to move physically and in terms of shape, enables the transformation of this commodity to take place. If the mythology of the automobile is really a mythology of movement as Barthes suggests, this movement is what occurs in the film. It is not that the automobile changes, as much as its modes of communication, travel and development change.

From the generalised cityscape to the particularised village

Despite the fact that this film seems to work more or less with Benjamin and Barthes's conceptions of mythology, I am left with some critical questions to ask. Benjamin and Barthes wrote in Europe, exploring the mythology of the city, a "new" mythology that they believed somehow came about because of the particular everyday life there. Their

understandings of myth emerge from the urban context—from examining the arcades for the traces of history left behind or from delving into language and following the remains of history and genealogy found there. How do these circumstances affect an understanding of mythology as read with *Divine Carcasse*?

Why Africa? What does moving these ideas of mythology, fetishizing, commodification, and history to Africa add to or take away from the general understanding of mythology? What changes once Europe is no longer the centre of these debates? How do the terms of the debate change and why, when Africa is put into the equation?

Why a village? What happens to the theorising of mythology once it is removed from the urban context? Again, how do the terms of the debate change and why once the village occupies the centre? Does the move from the city to the village nullify the “new” mythology of the urban context? Are there ways in which the new mythology still works or does the old mythology of nature re-assert itself? What happens when this film moves the questions of mythology back to the village?

Taking up the question of what happens when this modernity and its conceptions of mythology are moved to Africa, first I think that it is fair to say that modernity is not exactly the same. The “European-ness” of modernity is exposed. The emphasis on commodification, the urban and other European cultural values appears clearly. Modernity reflects the culture that produced it. Thus, taking into consideration the culture in which modernity was created is made highly important when the concept is discussed.

This importance of culture in modernity can then allow for African culture to be brought into the dialogue. Kwame Gyekye writes in *Tradition and Modernity:*

Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience:

The alleged spirituality of the African world—which in the traditional setting is in many ways allowed to impede sustained inquiries into the world of nature—will have to come to terms with materiality, that is, with the physical world of science.²⁰

The culture of Africa will have an effect on modernity; the interface of spirituality (the African characteristic) with materiality (the European value) will eventually have to be negotiated.

Does this film embody one way of exploring this negotiation? Does *Divine Carcasse* imagine the coming to terms of materiality with spirituality in the African context? I think that this is one attractive way in which to read the film. However, the fact that the spiritual wins out so clearly against the material is troubling. I do not think that Gyekye would posit that one pole of that dichotomy would have to eliminate the other. A song that the villagers sing in order to accept Agbo seems to erase the materiality of the automobile and entirely supplant it with a spiritual mythology. Even though I think that this film shows the beginning stages of an interaction between African and European values, ultimately one is left behind in favour of the other, a fact that renders this reading difficult to sustain.

How else should African cultural values be interwoven into modernity other than through the spiritual element? Gyekye claims:

Within the framework of Western modernity one gets the impression that industrialism and urbanism, both of which are the concomitants of technology, are conceived as subversive of the communitarian ethos, disruptive of social ideals, and, consequently, destructive of the concern

for the interests of others, to be replaced by the pursuit of individual and egoistic interests.²¹

Gyekye claims that individualism is not a necessary component of modernity; it is just one that took place in Europe. Once the traces of European values are seen as belonging to modernity, it is easier to see what pieces of the philosophy are necessary and which are purely culturally affiliated. The emphasis on individualism is not seen as critical in modernity for Gyekye and he makes room for a reading of modernity that includes communitarianism.

Would this different understanding of modernity in Africa as incorporating community values work within the context of the film? First, the function of the automobile object broadens from an individual utilisation to a communitarian one. The different uses of the Peugeot and the different understandings of ownership of the car illustrate that transition. It begins its functionality in the film as being a car for private use by the expatriate Frenchman, Simon. Simon is the owner of the car and, with him, the car is individual and isolated. In the scene in which Simon becomes so fed up with the car that he decides to give it away, he and the car are shown utterly stranded on the road, with not another person, automobile or building in sight. In the intermediate stage of Joseph's proprietorship, there is a more intermediate understanding of ownership. The car's function in this stage is one of a semi private/semi public usage in the form of a taxicab. Joseph drives the car, but he drives other people to where they want to go. The ownership is part private/part public as well. The other villagers feel that they have a stake in the Peugeot. During a ceremony in which the Beninois make sacrifices and pray, a woman says "Ancestors, I invoke you.... You, ancestor of Joseph, I ask you to welcome Joseph and the asset he brings the family and that you take care of this asset...."

We will use it to bring profits to our brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, friends, relatives and allies....” This ownership is a communal one on the part of the Beninois neighbours, although Joseph believes that he is the only owner of the car. In the final stage, after the car has been re-formed into Agbo, the use and ownership are purely communal. The village accepts Agbo, and, despite the fact that four men are the envoys sent to collect Agbo from the sculptor, they are never shown in an ownership role as Simon and Joseph are. Thus, this shift from individual to collective is clearly shown depending upon the use and ownership of the car.

However, how does this shift affect the understanding of mythology? Do the mythologies shift at the same time as this transition from individual to collective? While the car is used for Simon’s private use, it participates in the kind of mythology described by Barthes. The car actively partakes in the ambiguity of language. Simon’s friends laugh at the car, commenting on its age, how its parts are worn out and will need a lot of repair work. They actively highlight the age of the car in the meaning of “ancestor.” This section, when brought into dialogue with Joseph’s section, which highlights the in-between-ness of the term, and the final section, which highlights the divinity meaning of “ancestor,” clearly show the genealogy of the term. The transformation illustrates the linguistic mythology.

However, in other ways, mythology does shift. The cultural values that are part of the different stages work their ways into the mythology. In Benjamin’s writing, fetishizing the commodity creates a mythology around it that reflects cultural values. Once that idea moves to Africa and especially once it is moved to Benin—a centre of voodoo—understanding of the fetish dramatically changes. The fetish becomes much

more closely linked to spirituality and to popular beliefs. Simon finds a fetish in his car and accuses Joseph of putting it there. Joseph goes to a *feticheur* who tells him that he needs to mend his relationship with his deceased, maternal uncle. The fetish is not a metaphor in this culture, but instead something closely linked to everyday life.

Differences in cultural understanding are reflected in the mythology.

Certainly, the fetish in Africa and in Europe relates to mythology, but does so in different ways. In Africa, a fetish is related to a spiritual mythology; in Europe, it is related to a commodity-based mythology. This example of the fetish illustrates a difference in the understanding of mythology created by the removal of the debate from Europe to Africa. It is interesting that this difference in the idea of the fetish seems to actively participate in Barthes' mythology, in much the same way as the term *ancêtre* does. That is, the mythology of the word "fetish" is performed throughout the course of the film.

Moving away from the question of how the grounding of these debates in Africa would change interpretation, I now turn to the question of moving the mythology to the village. Modernity, as conceived of by Europe, was always on a search for what was new. This "newness" can be conceived of in a variety of ways: commodities, peoples, places, etc. Reflecting the culture and the cultural values of its time, modernity certainly was influenced by the impulse to colonise. The time at which Baudelaire, who greatly influenced Benjamin, wrote, at the end of the nineteenth century, also saw Franco-Dahomean wars that eventually gave control of Benin to the French.²² Modernist discourse reflected the desire for new territory, as illustrated by the proclivity to colonise.

However, if urban areas in the present timeframe are now growing “generic” as proposed by Rem Koolhaas in the article “The Generic City,” what other option does this quest for novelty have, other than to move away from the city? Koolhaas describes this non-particularised urban landscape when he writes:

The Generic City is the city liberated from the captivity of center, from the straitjacket of identity. The Generic City breaks with the destructive cycle of dependency: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history.²³

The Generic City is losing its particularised identity. It looks like every other city and is without real character. The Generic City expands in relation to how commodity culture, that which creates this city grows and becomes global.

Why is this “generic” city liberated from history? History is the link to particularity. A history ties a city to its individuality. Instead, that history in the generic city is being forgotten and left behind. Forgotten history can be read in tandem with Benjamin’s writings about mythology in the city. Graeme Gilloch claims:

As pioneered in the Berlin writings, the modern metropolis constitutes the site of amnesia. Forgetfulness dooms the modern individual to that fundamental dimension of mythic consciousness and experience: repetition.²⁴

Without history, like the Generic City, the urban individual is sentenced to less particularity, more mythology and ceaseless repetition. The Generic City is also engaged in repetition, as Koolhaas points out when he writes, “the Generic City is fractal, an endless repetition of the same simple structural module.”²⁵ Thus, the Generic City embodies exactly the traits that make the shaking off of myth impossible. It may be that this globalisation of the Generic City, the way in which it sustains mythology, and the

competing urge for the novel as espoused by modernity force the theorists out of the urban.

If the urban is no longer new, and every urban space is growing to be the same, what other option is there in the search for new territory other than the non-urban? This desperation may be, then, why the village becomes such an important site in *Divine Carcasse*. Forced out of the city in its quest for novelty and its quest for new territory, modernity heads for the specifically non-urban, hoping to recover the identity that the Generic City has stripped away.

The search for novelty does indeed lead out of the urban and into the village, as demonstrated in *Divine Carcasse*, but what does that mean for myth? Does this change force myth back into nature if indeed it is pushed out of the more modern urban setting? I think that it would be short-sighted to claim that this film brings mythology from the modern urban site back to a nature-related village mythology. Mythology as portrayed in this film fully participates in both the urban and the non-urban. It is clearly and definitively tied to Barthes' conception of language and Benjamin's understanding of the "afterlife" even when (especially when) Agbo is paraded through the streets of the village. The modern conceptions of mythology are not left behind, only modified at the same time as the transmutation of the car. When presented with the particularity of the African village, European modern mythology must change somehow. The solution that *Divine Carcasse* suggests is a blending of European and African mythologies in a complex, debatable, sometimes uneasy, combination that parades a French automobile down a village pathway in the form of Agbo.

Divine Carcasse proves to be an extremely satisfying site upon which to explore questions of modernity. Although the answer of moving toward the small village seems to directly contradict the exploration of the urban, this movement seems to be a more or less logical progression in this film. Ideas of mythology and understandings of the major concepts linked to modernity require re-examination once they are presented in *Divine Carcasse*, and I think that this adds to the ways in which both modernity and this film can be understood.

Louis Aragon, in *Le paysan de Paris*, discovers a new mythology while walking through the streets of Paris. He suggests that this new mythology entirely supplants the older understanding of myth. Perhaps the car that is carried through the streets of the village Ouassou shows a way in which to discover a new new mythology, one that highlights cultural values in its conception and, instead of entirely supplanting the earlier myths, integrates both the new and the old in its understanding.

Notes

¹ *Divine Carcasse* [videorecording], (Underworld Films, produced and directed by Dominique Loreau, 1998).

² "Divine Carcasse" <http://www.newsreel.org/films/divine.htm>, 4/19/00.

³ Louis Aragon, *Le paysan de Paris* (Paris: Impression Société Nouvelle Firmin-Didot, 1998).

⁴ Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment," in Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

⁵ Michael Hollington, "Benjamin, Fourier, Barthes," *With the Sharpened Axe of Reason* (Washington, DC: Berg, 1996) 125.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Konvolut* N1,9, <http://art.derby.ac.uk/~g.peaker/arcades/Surreal.html>, 4/19/00.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the 19th Century," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed., Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 162.

⁸ Samuel Decalo, *Historical Dictionary of Benin: Third Edition* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995) 363.

⁹ Lesson for February 5th:

Plato divides the world into two. The world of sensation: everything is ephemeral. The world of eternal ideas. Knowledge is of the world of ideas. It is necessary to imagine men, prisoners at the base of a cave, sitting with their backs to the light, condemned to see nothing but the wall in front of them.

¹⁰ Graeme Gilloch, *Myth & Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996) 14.

¹¹ Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Barthes, Roland,” in Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) 70.

¹² Alvin A. Lee, “Myth,” in Irena R. Makaryk, ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 597.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 597.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957) 215: “it is evident from this that myth cannot be an object, a concept or an idea, it is a mode of signification, it is a form.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 232: “Myth has an imperative character, interpellating; part of a historic concept, arising directly from contingency (a Latin class, threatened empire), it is *I* who it comes to look for: it turns toward me, I am subject to its intentional force, it commands me to receive its expansive ambiguity.”

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, “La voiture: projection de l’ego” (*Réalités* 213, Octobre 1963) 95 : “The car, it seems, came at the last moment of this itinerary, one fights for it, to buy it, to maintain it (from which arises the acuteness of the consciousness it provokes), but already banal, it only takes a little before it becomes insignificant (there is no mythology of the refrigerator in America). Since this is not yet the case, there remain in the French car traces of mythology....”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies* 239: “transforms sense into form.”

¹⁹ Barthes, “La voiture: projection de l’ego,” 97: “it is not so much, maybe, a mythology of the automobile that it is necessary to write: it is a mythology of driving.”

²⁰ Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 281.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

²² Decalo, 174-5.

²³ Rem Koolhaas, “The Generic City,” *S M L X L* (NY: The Monacelli Press, 1995), 1250.

²⁴ Gilloch, 106.

²⁵ Koolhaas, 1251.