

MAN AND CITY. MYTH AND VISION

P. CHATZIMPIROS¹, G. LAGOS², and G.-FIVOS SARGENTIS³

¹, French Institute of Urban Studies (IFU), Paris 8 University,

^{2,3}, National Technical University of Athens, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Dept. of Water Resources

e-mail: petros.chatzimpiros@univ-paris8.fr

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Myths are the expression of a group's unconscious. The genesis of a myth is the result of civilization's experience and myth's objective in past societies was to build a guide for social behavior. An important question is whether the characteristics of the myth or the characteristics of the modern thinking can be a good guide to fulfill the expectations of the modern city. The modern city, in order to reach the ultimate targets of the economic development, grows abnormally with monster-face ecological footprints, which, for the first time, set the civilization to be confronted with the carrying capacity of the ecosystems. In the metropolis, which can be considered as abnormal zones of the planet's surface, tragedies related to each living part of the assemblage take place. This occurs because metropolis offers to each citizen infinite possibilities for transportation, communication, pollution (to pollute). Consequently, each unit of the city participates blindly to the ecological footprint and environmental degradation by polluting without realizing the repercussion of his acts on Nature. On behalf of the citizens there is lack of maturity in being a part of the orchestra, as individuals are rarely able to define logical limits for their activities on their own. No substantial guide for an environmentally respectful behavior is provided and so the disrespectful use of the technology threatens to cause man a punishment analogous to the punishments relative to "hubris" referenced in ancient myths. This paper gives an erratic presentation of an issue (environmental presentation) viewed through an ancient myth. This is legitimate since this issue is not only scientific but ethical as well. The paper is supported by a sculpture work, created by Grigoris Lagos and Fivos Sargentis, which contains a city with flying Icaruses above it, in an attempt to express the blind contribution of the citizens at the generation of the actual environmental problems.

Key words: science, ecology, myth, philosophy, city, Icarus, ecological footprint

1. INTRODUCTION

Myth, science and art are characteristic creations of human civilization. At each historic period, each one of them followed a development that corresponded to the dominant needs, ideals, virtues, curiosity and structure of the society. Except for the differentiated importance that these creations occupied in the functioning of societies in historic periods, they also received different roles. Generally, the cities form a suitable and convenient place for their formation, growth and evolution and the activities and way of living of the citizens are driven and conformed by the morality and cognition that these creations inspired, (Figure 1a). Regarding the environment, the level of respect which was induced by the citizens in the ancient civilized societies was determined, at a great degree, by the myths and, through the evolution of civilization and human history, it passed at the responsibility of science. In this paper art tries to find its field of application between the myth and the science and suggests interactions, (Figure 1b).

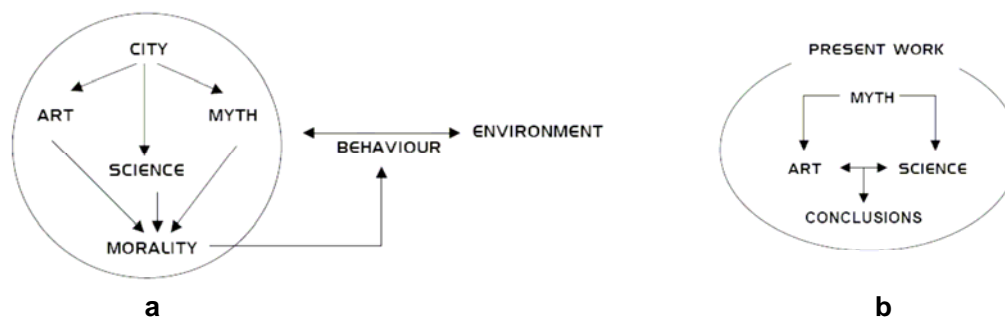


Figure 1: Introduction flowchart

This essay, studies the origins of myth, what it taught past societies, how the substitution of myth by science resulted in high polluting urban centers and in a delirious economic and technologic development.

2. MYTH AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

2.1. Introduction to the myths

Myths are the expression of a group's unconscious [1]. The genesis of a myth is the result of the civilization's experience which target in past societies was to build a guide for the social behavior. Myths are early science, the result of man's first attempt to explain what he saw around him. At the same time, myths were the common source of morality and religion [2], [3], [4].

The psychological motivation of myth-making explains the origin of this activity as a direct expression of human feeling rather than of intellectual thought. On this psychological premise, myth provides a rationalization and validation of human emotions rather than an objective explanation of nature [5]. Given that the myths are like the lenses in spectacles that we ordinarily look through them and not at them [6], the absence of objectivity and accuracy regarding the description of the mechanisms and functioning of the physical systems was not of primary concern on the minds of the first myth-makers. Instead, the basic role of the myth - to fulfill the human curiosity in a moral context - is attained and therefore the myth determined the admissible sphere of the human activity and intervention on the nature. This characteristic constituted a protective function of the myth towards the stability and sanity of the natural ecosystems.

2.2. An ancient myth

A famous myth dealing with the subject of the moral and objective limits of human activity within its environment is this of Daedalus and Icarus. In this ancient greek myth, Icarus flies from the tower where he is imprisoned, on wings made of wax and feathers. Forewarned by his father Daedalus not to fly too high so the sun won't melt the wings, Icarus continues to soar higher and higher as he was overwhelmed by the thrill of flying, until his wings melt, and he falls to his death [7].

This flight of Icarus, which symbolizes the human development, and his fall to his death, which illustrates the punishment that lurches on behalf of the natural powers superior to man's when his development exceeds the carrying capacity of the ecosystems, has a diachronic educational value and application. The basic engine of human's development, which at the same time constitutes a major trap related to the modification of the ecosystem's equilibrium, lies on his capacity to convert the natural resources into energy [8].

2.3. Myth in the modern dialectics

After the substitution of the role of the ancient myth as an explanatory instrument by the science and its combination with the rise and domination of urbanization, a more or less manipulated myth's role gets established in people's behavior, predominantly by means of a culture of consumption. Castoriadis, interpreting the political-environmental dimension of modern society, observes that "modern society is hubristic and deeply witless" [14]. This occurs because modern man is characterized by a lack of moral behavior towards the environment which stems from the disproportional trust to science and technology. In societies that are not dominated by superstitions and divinity, morality is a sense that is developed in the human thought by the simultaneous coexistence of cognition and awe. The value and functioning of the latter is delimited by advanced science whose worldview constitutes the most authoritative mythic system [6]. At any time, ideologies (religion, politics, science, commerce) provide the structures of cognitive processes which underlie the conscious thoughts, utterances and actions, and shape and motivate individual and group activities [15], [6].

The unconscious of the contemporary people, which remains the generator of myth, is no longer nourished by the ignorance and the curiosity (for discovering) but by the valorization of products and the technology. The untamed economic and technologic development penetrates the human unconscious, disguised as an ultimate virtue through the psychologically supported advertising.

The ecological exhortation of Nietzsche [16] 'Love the land of your children, and let this be your new courtesy', does not consist a virtue for the modern man.

3. CITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

3.1. Formation of cities (economic system and urbanization)

The very first vision of the formation of people assemblages was simply to gather people in order to create a safer environment. From then on, these assemblages helped them cope more easily with aspects such as food finding, security, communication and services. In short, man claimed the "εὐ ζῆν" in the city. In other words, we can admit that every living creature has the tendency to strain their abilities. So the animals can find what they are looking for in the Nature, in contrast to man who cannot find everything in

the natural environment. Therefore, a serious subsequent function of groups' formation was to promote thinking. And from then on, the role of the city is to defend the way of thinking of the citizens and to guarantee security.

An urban population is one in which vast numbers of people are clustered together in very small areas instead of being spread widely and thinly across the surface of the habitable earth. Such areas are characterized by high levels of consumption of every type of goods and services as well as waste generation and at the same time by very low or null levels of production of primary products and waste assimilation. Historically, two separate prerequisites were necessary to the urban development: the generation of surplus products that sustain people in non-agricultural activities [9], [10], and the achievement of a level of social development that allows large communities to be socially viable and stable [11]. Urban historians suggest that such conditions took place simultaneously in the Neolithic period when the first cities emerged in the Middle East [12]. However, it is further thought that the volume of surplus product imposed a ceiling upon urban development in the pre-industrial society [13]. Consequently, the urban world has emerged very recently. Towns and cities have existed for over eight millennia, but fewer than three per cent of the world's population lived in urban places in 1800 [11].

The economic systems that emerged in human societies after the industrial revolution found suitable field for application in the urban areas. However, the main concerns were not necessarily to fulfill the basic objectives, expectations and primordial reasons that led to first people gatherings. Under an environmental point of view, the development that takes place in occidental urban centers causes insecurity.

Nowadays, a new era is rising under the confusion of the facility of global transfer of information, culture and materials, where the city limits become virtual. If the vision of the ancient city was to defend the way of thinking of the citizens, the vision for the modern city is to be transparent to the globalization. At the global scale of the occidental world the preservation of thinking seems to stop being the motivation for the city and it gets replaced by the principle of the economic development and the domination of the technology. As a consequence, the modern myth is related to this principle.

3.2. Interpretation of the spatial patterns and of the technologic evolution

Downs argues that spatial images are the individual's cognitive representation of the spatial environment and they are a summary of what they consider meaningful about the environment [17].

Every spatial transformation contributes to the formation of a new spatial pattern. And every technologic achievement contributes to the modification of people's needs, customs, habits, practices and behavior. The activities that take place in the modern society emerge by these human characteristics and by mimesis and they are being supported by social structure and infrastructures.

Together the spatial transformations, the technologic progress and their utilization and derivations in the modern world show clearly that humanity is embedded in the myth of Icarus and lives through it. Usually, technological evolution causes the densification of time and this temporal alteration is a basic indicator of the domination of the modern myth [18], (Figure 2). Modern society ignores the symbolic warning of Daedalus and so the old rational myth is neglected and the norms and respect that it tried to teach, did not pave the way for choosing a rational human development. Contrary, actual development follows the famous phrase of Descartes, "we should master and possess the nature" [19].

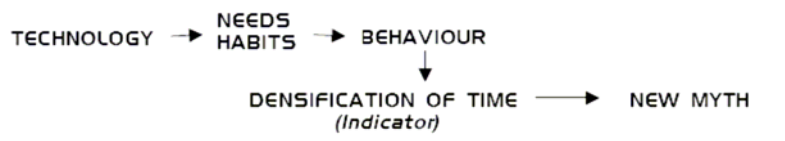


Figure 2: Procedure and indication of the genesis of the modern myth

As Musil observes, people in previous historic times experienced the productive incentives through a filter of Logic, thus their starting point for any action was based on several requirements. On the other hand, nowadays we progress without any directive idea or any use of the demonstrative method of the conscious inductive reasoning. “We try things at random like monkeys” [20], (Figure 3).

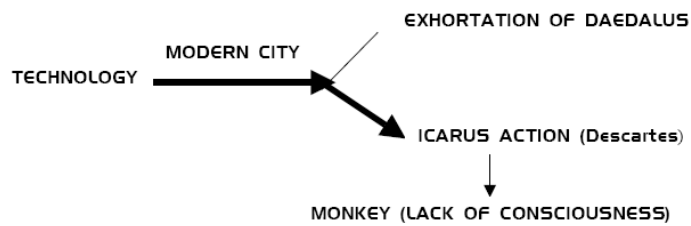


Figure 3: The influence of technology in new morality

3.3. The trap resulting from the urbanization

The urbanization creates areas that loose sight of the natural environment and where the consumption of goods and the production of wastes have no visible repercussion on the degradation of the natural resources that provide the commodities. The metropolis offers to every citizen infinite possibilities for transportation, communication pollution (to pollute). The great degree of freedom concerning the way of utilization of the financial power at individual level, may result in high consumption attitudes of the citizens with serious environmental impacts [21], [22], (Figure 4). For example, the environmental load imposed by a citizen who decides to spend an amount of his money in clothing is much more important than the one resulting from the expense of the same money in cultural events. Additionally, the choice to go for shopping by car is by far more environmentally costly than to go to the cinema on bicycle.

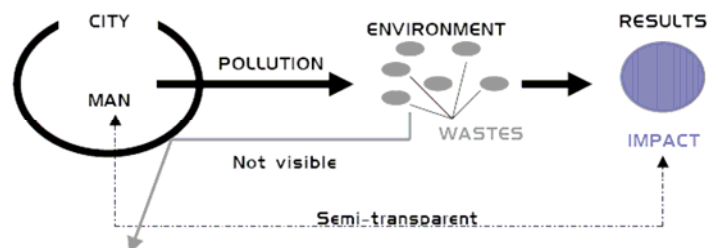


Figure 4: Schematization of the absence of direct and of the lack of accumulated repercussion to the impacts of the human activity on the environment

What we observe in most of the modern mega-cities is that most of the actual inner urban development concerns the transformation of land from natural to urban and the

conversion of urban land-uses from economically inactive into economically profitable, by the modification of land's attractiveness [23]. But even further, a newly conceived type of consumption centers is emerging more and more frequently. It concerns multifunctional environments [24], the shopping malls, providing retail, recreation and community facilities [25]. Their development clearly shows that they endeavor to mimic the essential features of the city, at such an extent to replace the city itself. In the meanwhile, their internal structure and organization is driven by strategies respectful to consumption's maximization [26]. They threaten to found the second most important mutation in man's choice of his living environment after the rupture between people and nature performed by the urbanization.

Benjamin documents a provocative reaction to the densification of time and to the frenetic rhythm of the modern way of living which was expressed around 1840 by some eccentric citizens who were walking around in the phantasmagorical commercial areas of Paris, carrying turtles as companions, in order to declare a virtue in time wasting [27].

4. FOR A RATIONAL MODERN WAY OF THINKING

4.1. Environmental ethics

Why do modern humans follow such a consumptive and materialistic way of living? Methods like the ecological footprint [28], no matter how inaccurate they may be [29] clearly illustrate the trends of the human appropriation of the natural resources.

The method of the Ecological Footprint measures the impact of man upon the planet by comparing yearly the planet's biocapacity to the man's demand for bioproductive area and accounts principally for the 'overshot' being caused by the CO₂ emissions that surpass the sequestration rates performed by the plants [30]. It depicts therefore the non sustainable development of the human society. Such calculations do not do more than measuring and confirming what a large part of the global population has already called 'climate change'. Studies have shown [31] that most of the carbon footprint results from the goods and services that are produced around the world for human consumption. New methods like the Water Footprint [32] are emerging that show the absence of sustainability in the exploitation of water resources. Do we really need all these commodities which are provided for us?

Do we understand that the great importance that we attribute to ourselves by seeking for the ephemeral satisfaction is chimerical but marks instead profoundly and indelibly the natural equilibrium? (Figure 5)

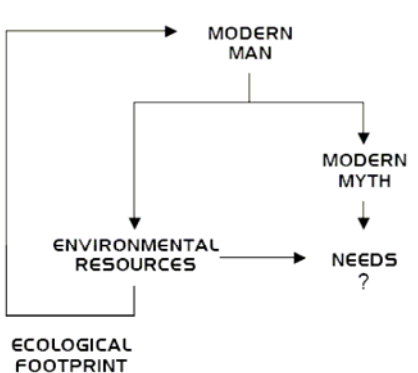


Figure 5: The role of the ecological footprint (flowchart)

Have we created science and surpassed ancient myths in order to obey blindly at the modern myth imposed by the technologic and economic development? Science does not manage to explain the man's adherence to the modern myth. It is though certain that the latter appeals to a very large group of people and that it has a great potential of application.

4.2 Sculptural expression of environmental concerns

In analogy to the myth of Icarus, the evolution of the modern society driven by technologic development, shows signs of disrespect towards the environmental equilibrium. In an attempt to shape the above conception, an artistic application is created which tries to interpret in a modernized framework the issue of the interface between man and its environment. At this end, a conceptual city is given shape (G. Lagos) which expresses the field of action of the modern man.

Georges Perec, using a poetic rationality, refers to the city as following: "We could never account for the city. The city is here. It is our place, we don't have any other... There is nothing inhuman about a city- except for the humans." [33]

In this paper's sculpture work, the citizens are represented by little Icaruses (sculpted by Fivos Sargentis), firmly connected to the city, expressing the personal tragedies as well as a questioning on our way of living which is not conformed to an environmental and ecological morality. The myth is applied at the city, which is the place of its vitalization, and the transformation of man into Icarus refers to every individual's contribution in the generation of environmental problems. With respect to Aristotle's definition of the tragedy, «μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας και τελείας μέγεθος εχούσης... δι ελέου και φόβου περαίνουσα την των τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν» [34], the city is a "theatre" of individualities which experience the tragedy by imitation and reproduction Icarus actions. Analyzing the figures in a modern pattern, we end up at the present schematization (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Draft of the sculpture work

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is true that the concerns about environmental impacts are today much more proliferous than they used to be. Instead, there are no obvious signs of the necessary rational solutions that are required and this is the result of a misconception about the way that

science relies on its own interpretation of the formulation of reason. The scientific progress uses the tactic of the onward march. It evolves on fields where it encounters little resistance for the solving of the problems which, our level of development, enables us to handle. And this means basically the handling of those problems which are characterized by the concurrence of single law-governed phenomena. However, the concurrence of multiple law-governed phenomena, with multiple, equitably important interactions, are those who generate problems of significantly difficult management and resolution. This is where morality should involve towards the concerns that preoccupy humanity.

In the present work, the art tries to find its area of application between the science and the myth. For the expression of a rational elaboration of the actual order and situation in the modern city, the environmental problems, that mainly concern the ethics of the attitude of humans towards the ecosystems, are represented as images that refer to an ancient myth characterized by environmental respect, when seen under a modernized worldview. The vision of the modern city should include a more substantial consideration of the environment, with rationalization of the human needs and of the technology used to achieve them.

The attempt for the intermediation of the art in the representation, communication and philosophical elaboration of the environmental and therefore social problems, detected by scientific means, constitutes a new substantial approach for the rationalization of humanity's actions. The present work suggests that the combination among the communicative capacity of the art, the respect towards the nature emitted by the ancient myth, and the power of a rationally used science, can underlie a substantial discussion on sustainability issues (Figure 7).

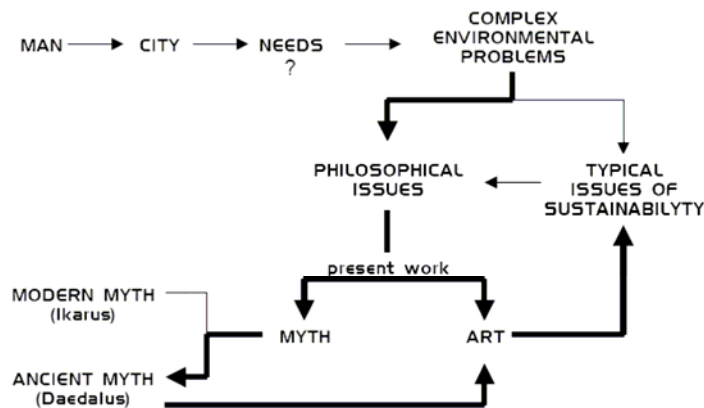


Figure 7: Conclusions' flowchart

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank C. Memo, K. Hadjibiro, G. Aidini, A. Moschato, and G. Baka for their constructive remarks

REFERENCES

1. Jung, C. G., (1934–1954). *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. (1981 2nd ed. Collected Works Vol.9 Part 1), Princeton, N.J.: Bollingen
2. Dardel E., *The Mythic: According to the Ethnological Work of Maurice Leenhardt Diogenes*, 1954 2: 33-51
3. Bergson H., *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 1932. (*Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*), University of Notre Dame Press 1977
4. Cassirer E., *Le mythe de l'État* (*The myth of the State*), tr. fr. de B.Vergely, Paris, Gallimard, 1993
5. Bidney D., Myth, Symbolism, and Truth, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 68, No. 270, Myth: A Symposium (Oct. - Dec., 1955), pp. 379-392
6. Danser S., *The myths of reality*, Alternative Albion, 2005
7. Graves R., (1955—Cmb/Rep edition 1993). *The Greek Myths*, Penguin
8. Koronaios Aim. and G. F. Sargentis, 2005, *Construction materials and ecology*, National Technical University of Athens (in greek)
9. Childe, V.G., 1950, The urban revolution, *Tn Plann. Rew.* 21: 3-17
10. Harvey D.W., 1973, *Social justice and the city*. London: Edward Arnold
11. Lampard E.E., 1965, *Historical aspects of urbanisation*. In Clark David's, Interdependent Urbanization in an Urban World: An Historical Overview, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 164, No. 1. (Mar., 1998), pp. 85-95.
12. Wheatley P., 1971, *The Pivot of the four quarters*. Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press
13. Sjoberg G., 1960 *The pre-industrial city*. Dubque, IA: Free Press
14. Castoriadis K., *Anthropology Politics Philosophy*, Ipsilon/ books, Athens 2001 (in greek)
15. Cassirer Ernst, 1944, *An essay on man*. New Haven: Yale University Press
16. Nietzsche F., *Also sprach Zarathustra*, greek trans. by Diktaios A., Dodoni, Athens, 1983
17. Downs R.M., 1970, Geographic space perception: Past approaches and future prospects, *Progress in Geography*, 2 : 70-81
18. Sargentis G.F., Dead time, *Nea Politiki* Vol 2, edt. Papazisi, Athens 2005a
19. Descartes R., *Discours de la Méthode*, VI. 1637
20. Musil R., *The man without qualities*, 1965, Capricorn Books
21. Sargentis G.F., Great infrastructures or Vavel tower, *Nea Politiki* Vol 3, edt. Papazisi, Athens 2005 b
22. Uzzell L. D., 1995, The myth of the indoor city, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Volume 15, Issue 4, Pages 299-310
23. Whitehead T., D. Simmonds and J. Preston, 2006, The effect of urban quality improvements on economic activity, *Journal of Environmental Management*, Volume 80, Issue 1, p. 1-12
24. Lewis G. H., 1990, Community through exclusion and illusion: the creation of social worlds in an American shopping mall, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27, 121–136
25. Anthony K. H. (1985). The shopping mall: a teenage hangout, *Adolescence*, 20, 307–312.
26. Sommer R., Aitkens S., 1982, Mental mapping of two supermarkets, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 9 pp.211-215
27. Benjamin W., *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by H. Zohn, London: New Left Books (Verso), 1983.
28. Rees W. and Wackernagel M., 1996, Urban ecological footprints: Why cities cannot be sustainable—And why they are a key to sustainability, *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, Volume 16, Issues 4-6, Pages 223-248
29. Van den Bergh J.C.J.M., Verbruggen H., 1999a. An evaluation of the 'ecological footprint': reply to Wackernagel and Ferguson. *Ecological Economics* 31, 319–321.
30. WWF Living planet report, *Global footprint network*, 2006
31. IAURIF, L'Empreinte Ecologique des habitants de la région Ile de France, *Conseil Régional d'Ile de France*, 2005
32. Chapagain, A.K. and Hoekstra A.Y., (2004), Water footprints of nations, Value of Water Research Report Series No.16, UNESCO-IHE
33. Pérec, G., 1974, *Espèces d'espaces*, Paris, Editions Galilée
34. Aristotle, *Poetics* (Αριστοτέλης, *Ποιητική*, around 350 BC), trans. M. Heath, Penguin Classics, New Ed. edition, 1997