

Horn Dance or Stag Night?



Folklore and myth in the age of blogs

Bob Trubshaw

Why is a stag night or an office in-joke as good an example of folklore as morris dancing or a fairy tale? Why does the rhetoric of eco-politics seem like the recycling of myths dating back well over 2,000 years? How often have American presidents imitated Hollywood action movies? How do the mass media successfully construct the 'deep structures' of modern society?

Apart from a few people in universities studying folklore or mythology these questions may seem strange. In this booklet Bob Trubshaw suggests that, far from being strange, folklore and mythology – at least as understood by academics – are key to understanding the processes by which we create our all-encompassing 'social reality'.

At a time when Western 'social reality' is increasingly contrived by the vested interests of global commerce, and shaped by the media magnates within that cartel, the folkloric transmission of ideas via emails, blogs and personal Web pages has increasing importance. The ability to consciously recognise the way myths – or, more accurately, 'mythic fragments' – are used by the media is also key to understanding how 'spin' attempts to delude us all.

Horn Dance or Stag Night? does not offer a detailed understanding of the construction of social reality. Instead it suggests some fruitful directions for further thinking. The result is both enlightening and empowering.

Bob Trubshaw has written numerous books, booklets and articles, including several books on folklore and mythology. He founded Heart of Albion eighteen years ago.

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Heart of Albion

To the memory of Doug Fowell, for many years leader of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance team. He died a few weeks after the cover photograph was taken in September 2006, aged 78, after taking part in the Horn Dance for 71 years.

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Is the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance a better example of a folk custom than a stag night? The answer depends on what you think a 'folk custom' is. For those who think that folk customs are more-or-less fossilised traditional – usually rural – customs then they may have difficulty even thinking that stag nights have much to do with folk customs at all. Those who have followed academic thinking in folklore over the last forty or more years will realise that restricting the concept of 'folk customs' to archaic rural traditions is essentially a deep distortion caused by nineteenth century folklorists – themselves part of a much larger romanticisation of rural England – and their unwitting successors.

If we turn to the work of British and American academic folklorists over the last forty or more years, we will quickly pick up that folk customs, folklore and other folk-whatevers are best thought of as the customs, lore or whatever that bond a particular social group together. So, among other things, the Horn Dance helps 'bond' the people of Abbots Bromley together – along with more transiently bonding the many visitors who attend the event in September.

Similarly, like all other folk-whatevers, stag nights are supremely good examples of bonding a 'social group' – in this case the groom and his 'best mates' – together in a way that, in memory at least, will endure. It also bonds them to the mix of people who made up previous stag nights they have each been part of, and those they will probably be part of in the future. So, an excellent example of a folk custom?

What distinguishes folk-whatevers is that they are passed on in a face-to-face way. Writing and, in more recent years, photography and video, may *record* what takes place but it is not the primary way in which 'what takes place' (or, in the case of folk lore, 'what is told') is repeated. Certainly folk-whatevers do not rely on the mass media or even printed books and periodicals for their continuity. So what distinguishes folk-whatevers is less

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what the whatever is (dance, mummers play, song, legend, fairy story, nickname, in joke...) that how it is passed on and transmitted.

What takes places or is told invariably slowly evolves. The meaning and significance given to what takes place may well be varied even among participants and regular spectators. Indeed the meaning and significance can potentially change quite rapidly – much more rapidly than what is taking place.

And what folk-whatevers ‘do’ is not so much about what they are (dance, song, story, joke...) than how they help bond a social group together. In-jokes between people who work in the same office or socialise at the same gym are, in the eyes of modern folklorists, as much folklore as, say, morris dancing. Passing on such lore relies on face-to-face conversations (and, increasingly in the last ten years, the electronic counterparts such as text messages, emails, chat rooms, blogs and personal Web sites) rather than on anything transmitted via the media.

Knowing a specific in-joke – such as which manager is being referred to when a scurrilous nickname is used – makes you part of a specific social group. Families are an excellent example of folk groups. Cryptic statements such as ‘Remember the time at Andrew’s wedding?’ or ‘Don’t do an Aunt Beth on us’ simply do not need expanding to anyone who is part of the same family. *De facto* they exclude anyone who is not part of that ‘in group’. Similarly, expressions such as ‘Aunt Beth spent some time in The Towers’ exclude anyone who is not part of the ‘social group’ making up residents of Leicester (who use ‘The Towers’ as a euphemism for the city’s psychiatric hospital).

Who determines what happens at a stag night? Clearly the groom-to-be may express a preference between, say, clay pigeon shooting, 4x4 driving, or good ol’ fashioned strippers. The providers of package stag night tours to Prague, Dublin, Riga, Bratislava or wherever will offer specific options. But the dressing up in daft costumes and all the associated joking and tomfoolery will be based on – but subtly different from – the participants’ previous experience of stag nights. Photos, videos and even Web sites may *influence* the actions, but they are not the *primary* factor. Above all, as already noted, stag nights share the main function of all folk-whatevers: they bond a social group together.

Everything is always now

At the risk of being overly-philosophical, the past does not exist. The past is recreated in the present from ‘memories’. Writing, books, drawings,

photographs, sound recordings, videos and all the rest may assist the process of remembering but – as any theoretically-aware historian will confirm – ‘the past is a construct consequent upon the questions asked by the historian’ (Marwick 1970). So a Marxist historian such as E.P. Thompson asked quite different questions about, say, the consequences of eighteenth century Enclosure than historians sympathetic to the landed classes, and came up with a radically different view of the past as a result.

Folklore – traditional or contemporary – frequently exists in the realm of tales which are retold orally (with few if any written counterparts) or ‘customs’ which exist only so much as they are re-enacted, be that morris dancing or stag nights. So the past of folklore and all folk-whatevers is constructed according to the ‘questions’ asked by the folklorists. I do not propose to devote this small booklet to even attempting to outline the diversity of such approaches. Until recent decades most of these reconstructions were rooted in a deeply romanticised reconstruction of the English past. Regrettably, outside the realms of academically-informed folklore, most remain entirely buried within this romantic fantasy of how it (never) was.

‘Traditional’ folklore (however you want to define ‘traditional’) exists in so much as it is recorded and studied, or has survived, adapted and been re-invented in the present day. As noted, outward forms usually change slowly while the meaning and significance are invariably ‘pluralistic’ (and always were) and capable of changing rapidly. So, for example, is the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance an example of a ‘pagan fertility’ dance’ going back to pre-Christian times? Or an early-modern seasonal begging custom literally ‘dressed up’ to enhance the intake of much-needed small change? Or just another aspect of the myth of the English rural idyll cherished by ‘tourists’? Or? Or?

The view from the heart

Shifting interest to another aspect of folk-whatevers, then legends – by which folklorists mean ‘tall stories’ told as if they are true – can be found in both traditional contexts (for example, the legend of the ‘phantom hitchhiker’ is first recorded well before the invention of motorised vehicles) and in undoubtedly contemporary ones (such as legends of people involuntarily donating a kidney or the various ‘Welcome to the world of AIDS’ legends). Indeed, as Paul Screeon has ably demonstrated, a whole book can be written about legends relating to railways (not to mention the lore of ‘trainspotters’) – see *Crossing the Line* published by Heart of Albion in 2006.

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However such so-called ‘contemporary legends’ – interesting as they are – are not why I think the study of folklore is key to understanding contemporary society. When I re-activated Heart of Albion nearly six years ago the main aim was to promote awareness of modern academic thinking about folklore and mythology. I helped get the ball rolling myself with *Explore Folklore* which – in more detail than the preceding paragraphs – attempts an overview of the state of play of modern academically-informed folklore study, and *Explore Mythology* which attempts a similar overview of the state of play in the study of myths (although my attempt is more idiosyncratic than William Doty’s subsequently-published book *Myth: A handbook* (Doty 2004) or Robert A. Segal’s *Myth: A very short introduction* (Segal 2004) – Doty’s book is by far the best of this trilogy of overviews).

I would like to have been able to say *Explore Folklore* offers an overview of ‘modern academic folklore study’ but sadly academic folklorists are a decidedly rare species (and academic mythologists even rarer) in both British and American universities. Those folklorists and mythologists who do survive within anglophone academe usually do so with other disciplines to the fore – their folklore and mythological interests are tolerated but not overtly encouraged. However the near-absence of folklore and mythology in academe does not mean that academic-quality research is not being published. In recent years Folklore Society members have written a steady stream of valuable books for leading UK publishers. Although invidious to select only a couple, Steve Roud’s *Penguin Guide to Superstitions of Britain and Ireland*, (2003) and Malcolm Jones’ *The Secret Middle Ages* (Sutton 2002) are both, in their different ways, most deserving winners of the Folklore Society’s annual book award – and the twenty-or-so other titles submitted to the award each year for consideration also confirm that folklore books with sound roots are not on the verge of extinction.

Add to these books the diverse subject matter of papers in the Folklore Society’s journal, *Folklore*, and one would be forgiven for thinking that folklore studies in Britain are in a healthy phase. Sadly this flurry of activity does not equate to a good state of health. This wealth of new knowledge is simply not reaching a wider audience. British folklore studies is far from healthy – rather it is coughing away in a cupboard where few people can hear. As for the study of myths in Britain, there is no fertile ‘middle ground’, just seemingly isolated pockets concerned with specific approaches.

The heart of what matters

This limited awareness is double frustrating because folklore and mythology – especially the ways in which they are transmitted and the role they play ‘bonding’ and defining social groups – are key to understanding the way societies – especially modern societies – create and transmit the whole caboodle of ‘meaning and significance’ that makes up ‘social reality’ (a term I will clarify on page 7).

Simon Danser, in his book *The Myths of Reality* (Alternative Albion 2005), covers a wide range of aspects of modern society – from commerce, science, through to consciousness and self-identity – and demonstrates that the usually unrecognised ‘deep structures’ underlying modern cultures are entirely mythic. In the realms of religion and politics we are accustomed to such remarks as ‘other people have myths, we have religion’ or castigating the ‘spin doctors’ of politicians we do not agree with (while comfortably ignoring the ‘spin’ of those we approve of). In the broad scheme of things, all such ideologies – religious, political, economic, scientific – are best thought of as a culture’s ‘deep structures’.

Danser, following a precedent set by a number of academics in various fields of cultural studies, equates these ‘deep structures’ of modern societies with the ‘myths’ of traditional societies. But surely myths are simply ‘traditional stories’ about gods and larger-than-life heroes? At this stage I can do no better than quote from the second chapter of *The Myths of Reality*. Danser writes:

The original sense of the Greek word *mythoi* was to refer to something untrue, a ‘tall story’. Indeed, the word ‘myth’ is commonly used in a derogatory sense that implies something is untrue.

Yet ‘myth’ also has the sense of much deeper significance. We get a glimpse of this in the truism ‘Other people have myths, we have religion’, or the suggestion that ‘Religion is what happens when you take myths too seriously.’ Nevertheless, while it is easy to label other peoples’ beliefs as ‘myths’ and thereby dismiss them as untrue, there is something about ‘myths’ that is deeper than their apparent content.

There is more to myths than larger-than-life characters and stories based on their activities. Myths are not just ‘any old

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stories' – otherwise we would call them stories, legends or tales. Myths may be thought of as akin to the lenses of spectacles. When we are wearing spectacles we do not see the lenses. We see *with them*. In the same way myths impart a worldview that is taken for granted. Only when we take off a pair of spectacles do we see the lenses. Only when we step back and think about myths can we begin to see how they shape what we think of as reality. The underlying 'assumptions' and structures presented (and, more typically, challenged and redefined) in myths provide the 'deep structures' underpinning the thinking of a society, or culture, or subculture.

Such 'deep structures' have nothing to do with Freudian or Jungian concepts of consciousness (although, confusingly, Freud and Jung both used traditional myths as inspiration for their own myths about consciousness). One of the deepest of these deep structures is language [...] Many of these deep structures are the systems of thought underlying politics, economics, religion and 'social norms' – what we usually think of as political and religious ideologies.

Children have a remarkable ability to intuitively develop a strong sense of reality and social norms. These are learned – although rarely in a conscious way – from parents, guardians and teachers, and during play activities. What emerges are shared definitions of reality (at the level of deep structures and ideologies) and ways of behaving which become taken-for-granted as 'reality'. Through a wide variety of social interactions – arguably, indeed *all* social interactions – this constructed sense of reality is shared, repeated and confirmed. Such shared structures simultaneously *enable* and *constrain* social activities.

We cannot exist without these structures. Each of us develops within a specific combination of such social, cultural and historic structures. This provides us with a range of possibilities to adopt, develop, challenge and transform. Our sense of identity is contained within our concepts of social reality. We identify with ideas of what we are expected to be much more than what we wish to be. And even our wishes are intimately linked with cultural expectations. We desire

what we think other people desire (and mass media moguls are only too happy to collaborate with the advertisers who sustain them and bombard us with details of what celebrities and lifestyle gurus seemingly crave). All too often individuals create a 'reality' which is a defective version of an illusory ideal; and their sense of self is constrained by these illusions. This is one reason why 'socially agreed reality is akin to a bleak Monday morning', as Alan Watts put it nearly fifty years ago. [...]

Our sense of reality persists only if it is continuously renewed by those we share it with. However, the underlying ideologies, accepted patterns of behaviour, and all that make up this 'socially constructed reality' *appear* to exist independently. We begin to think that this constructed reality really is 'real'. Few of us are aware of, still less examine, the 'spectacles' (i.e. myths) which create this illusion.

Danser goes on to cover a remarkable range of ideas in a comparatively compact book. Understandably, he does not attempt to draw in all the wealth of academic writing which overlaps with his ideas. So, although only briefly acknowledged by Danser, much of *The Myths of Reality* can be seen as a continuation of the ideas put forward by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. This work triggered a vast number of papers and books in a wide range of disciplines, and John Searle's 1995 book, *The Construction of Social Reality* provides a good summary of the state of play thirty years later.

The concept that 'social reality' (family, friends, self identity, social status, wealth, etc) is not something 'out there' but instead continually constructed – or, better, re-constructed – according to the various underlying beliefs and unrecognised 'myths' of a society may seem counter-intuitive. However once grasped (and Searle's and Danser's books provide appropriate introductions) then the world starts to make a lot more sense than simply accepting that this social reality is a 'given'. This in turn links in with the substantial volume of literature generated in the wake of Richard Rorty's provocative pronouncements about philosophy in the 1980s. Danser, again understandably, does not attempt to delve into this territory, even though there is a clear overlap as post-Rorty models of reality *contain* our concepts of philosophy rather than regarding philosophy as some abstract 'higher ground' from which 'reality' can be surveyed and defined. One of Rorty's key ideas was to recognise that

human thinking does not simply respond to an external reality (his metaphor was to 'mirror' reality) but that our thinking is part-and-parcel of the process of constructing reality.

Reality is not a 'thing'

More interestingly, if our social reality is being continually constructed and/or reconstructed then by its very nature reality is less like a 'thing' (or even an aggregate of many things) but more in the nature of an unbroken process. So, as the Taoist sages opined, 'You can't study a whirlpool by taking it home in a bucket.' Likewise if 'reality' is more akin to a process than something which can readily be split into 'things' and 'actions' (and our language-dominated consciousnesses are programmed to think in terms of nouns and verbs) then philosophers need to look at the 'whirlpool', not the frozen 'snapshots' which our language – and consciousnesses – are predisposed to conceptualise.

This is all rather alien to Western philosophy as it has evolved since Plato – although intriguingly it would not be alien to pre-Platonic philosophers such as Heraclitus (*circa* 535–475 BC), who is most famous for believing that 'everything flows' and allegedly noting that 'we can't step into the same river twice' – a stance which would be familiar to his proto-Taoist contemporaries in China.

If Taoist-influenced models of reality as a process are alien to established Western philosophical traditions, then Rorty's radical approach looks (among other things) at philosophy from 'outside' the established conventions of what-philosophers-do. His attempts to offer a model of reality are entirely compatible with the construction of social reality theses established in the 1960s (although Rorty's precepts allow for other ways of thinking about reality too). Jonathan Potter's somewhat ignored book *Representing Reality* (Potter 1996) is one of the best attempts to bring together post-Rortyan philosophy with the construction of social reality, with the added appeal that Potter's interest is specifically in how language is fundamental to this process.

Whirlpool philosophy

One of the problems of taking a philosophical approach to the suggestion that social reality is a process is that it brings into close proximity the words 'process' and 'philosophy'. What's the problem I hear you mutter? Well, for those with any knowledge of the history of philosophy, then the phrase 'process philosophy' will bring to mind the dire ruminations of Alfred Whitehead and some fellow travellers in the early twentieth

century. Worse still, one of Whitehead's key publications is called *Process and reality – an essay in cosmology*. Without digressing into a detailed critique of Whitehead and his followers, the words 'process', 'reality' and 'cosmology' (by which Whitehead and other philosophers mean the 'deep structures' – a.k.a. 'myths' – of a society) offer far more interesting options for philosophical enquiry than those offered by Whitehead back in 1929.

If looking afresh at reality as a process needs a convenient cognomen then anything which evokes Whiteheadian process philosophy would be fatally misleading. On the basis of the Taoist aphorism already cited, I'd be happy to call it 'whirlpool philosophy' – with more traditional forms of philosophical enquiry brought together as 'bucket philosophy' – although such epithets are probably not sufficiently self-evident to be helpful.

This brief booklet is not the place to get side-tracked into a detailed discussion of the nature of philosophical enquiry. According to the post-Rorty worldview, philosophy is *itself* an example of the 'deep structures' (or myths) which help to construct our social reality. Although old-school philosophers would argue that the aim of philosophy is to find the 'objective bases' on which human social activity takes place, Rorty and a number of his contemporaries have thoroughly demonstrated that such 'objective' higher ground simply does not exist and that *all* philosophy exists *within* the social structures – which include language – within which philosophy takes place.

Crucially, such process-based world views are not restricted to philosophy. Pierre Bourdieu was a sociologist who looked at the 'processes' of social construction – although he uses the more endearing term of 'interplay' – and at the 'structuring' – rather than 'the structures' – of society. By extension of my previous metaphor, Bourdieu is a 'whirlpool sociologist'. Although Bourdieu died in 2002 after a thirty-or-so-year career in France, his ideas remain little-known in anglophone academe. This is unfortunate as his work is more insightful than better-known contemporary French intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Sadly the vast gulf between European and American intellectual traditions means that there is little chance of anyone exploiting the potential of combining Rorty's process philosophy with the 'interplay' sociology of Bourdieu to gain some real insights into structuring social reality.

The myth of the Western rationalist myth

One of the aspects of the Western rationalist 'myth' is that there is an objective reality which can be 'discovered' by philosophy or the 'hard'

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sciences. But it is a myth that the 'Western rationalist myth' has been shared by all Western intellectuals – certainly the majority of 'ordinary' people think it's a myth. Nevertheless this example of nineteenth century mythmaking continues to dominate capitalist worldviews (perhaps because, intriguingly, it was uncontested by Marxism).

Over the last forty years the Western rationalist myth has been conclusively debunked (although it would be hard to tell from much writing aimed at the general public) and its various philosophical models revealed as products of their own preconceptions – with philosophers and their ilk all too often attempting only to find a justification for their beliefs and desires for specific moral and ethical stances to be regarded as *a priori* 'givens'.

Viewed from the 'whirlpool', philosophical enquiry and debate has always been *part* of the process by which we construct social reality, not an independent 'assessment' of either the process or any interim realities constructed along the way.

Hollywood creates our reality

However the construction of social reality is far from some abstruse academic or philosophical issue. If myths – or the 'deep structures' or 'cosmologies' – are key to the construction of social reality then clearly the study of these myths is key to understanding modern society.

Sometimes the mythmaking is so close to the surface that it is easy to recognise. Now that we understand better the way propaganda was used in the 1950s to create the threat of the 'Red Peril' and the rhetoric of the whole Cold War, we can more readily recognise the extent to which essentially the same processes are being used to create the myths of the current 'War on Terror'. Nevertheless the media resist attempts to draw attention to the mythmaking process they play a major part in promulgating.

Interest in disaster myths and apocalypses has been with us long before *Revelations* or the Scandinavian myths of Ragnarök were committed to writing. The same underlying ethos – and 'mythos' – has become increasingly prevalent in Hollywood blockbusters as well as becoming enshrined in eco-politics, with its rhetoric of the dire consequences of global warming. Rewrite all these plots along the lines of 'humans have been naughty and are going to be punished' and the similarities between Biblical retribution and here-and-now eco-politics seem even more

transparent. Recycling mythic themes is most certainly part of Green mythmaking!

British and American education singularly fails to teach the distinction between a fact and an idea, which conveniently opens the flood gates to all manner of political, religious and economic ideologies. With the general exception of BBC and Channel 4 news (although certainly not these channels' non-news output) the media also colludes in burying facts deeply amid opinion, with the broadsheet newspapers leading by prime example.

Simon Danser devotes the fifth chapter of *The Myths of Reality* to what he terms a 'fast forward' of how Holly wood and TV construct such 'intersections' of actuality and aspiration. Again it seems appropriate to quote directly:

Film and TV frequently seek to blur the borderline between fiction, fact and speculation. From Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928), through Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1992), to recent TV biographies of famous leaders as diverse as Napoleon, Churchill and Ghandi, all mythologise real-life individuals and political events. TV programmes increasingly use vague, stylised re-enactments to 'represent' a period or episode. Innumerable historical novels and plays provide even more scope for mythologising the past, whether the finery of Victorian Britain, the perils of the American West, or the escapades of war.

The way in which novels and films use stories that involve similar types of characters and similar situations to historically real events enables narrative and ideology to be seamlessly interwoven. As Hollywood and the moguls behind television are fully aware, such scriptwriting is one of the best ways to subtly communicate ideological beliefs. As 'innocent' a genre as 1950s cowboy films are populated with racist stereotypes and, in hindsight, are as much about myths of white supremacy as propaganda films put out by the Third Reich.

[...]

The antics of the Lone Ranger now seem to be the main inspiration for the 'scriptwriters' of the world's gung-ho

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superpower, with the president as the embodiment of the mythic Hollywood superhero....

For the last 25 years the clichés of cinematic heroes have provided role models for American Presidents, not least George W. Bush who was seemingly reliving countless cowboys movies when announcing in September 2001 he wanted Osama bin Laden 'dead or alive'. Then, towards the conclusion of the supposed 'liberation' of Iraq in May 2003, he arrived on the deck of an aircraft carrier in a fighter jet as if re-enacting a scene from the film *Independence Day* (1996) which has a fictional American president piloting combat aircraft against incoming alien attacks.

[...]

Early *Star Trek* episodes... had a Western frontier feel to them. This was sci-fi with irresistible optimism.... Although a little hard to imagine now, back in 1965 *Star Trek* was an aspirational vision of how America might evolve. There was also a Russian, Mr Chekov, in the bridge. More radically, a black person was included in this vision of future America. OK, she was little more than a switchboard operator, but young black Americans at the time picked up on this as important. And, in a small but significant step for mankind, the first inter-racial kiss shown on American network TV was that between Captain Kirk and Uhura.

In contrast Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (released in 1968) had the look and feel of white, modernist purity. The technological vision of *2001* was made to seem just around the corner, just 30 years ahead. Like *Star Trek*, the ideology of *2001* was self-conscious myth-making.

One up and coming director, George Lucas, saw even greater potential and intentionally deepened the mythic content of such science fiction by involving the maverick mythologist Joseph Campbell. *Star Wars* (released in 1977) combined the 'final frontier' with interstellar imperialism. Despite the galactic dimensions of the action, the combat in one-man fighters is reminiscent of gunfights outside Western saloons, or of Second World War dogfighting.

[...]

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The visiting Martian would note that violence and death are by far our major preoccupation. Violence has seeped from Hollywood action films into soaps. Death is the dominant topic of a vast output of crime investigation programmes, which in turn blur into the 'reality' of news programmes and documentaries. The parallels with the gladiatorial contests of the Roman empire are clear, and explicitly so with films such as *Spartacus* and *Gladiator*.

... war is just another TV program. Not so, of course, to the soldiers themselves or to the civilians maimed and killed by American missiles, but to the television audience. And although the vivid television coverage of Vietnam stirred up anti-war opposition, the coverage of the first Gulf War, with its greenish flickering images and explosions of phosphorescence, famously resembled a video game rather than a battlefield. (Hamilton 2004)

[...]

Alongside the relentless offerings of soaps, TV moguls provide us with a culture of violence and blue flashing lights. Hollywood has long portrayed a society in which guns and violent crime are inescapable, giving the illusion that such behaviour is, if not legal, at least normal.

[...]

Clear examples of the way we make sense of reality through myths arise when people are subjected to unexpected trauma. After the attack on the World Trade Centre on 11th September 2001, witnesses repeatedly said 'It was like a movie', 'It was like *Independence Day*', 'It was like *Die Hard*', 'No, *Die Hard 2*'.

If instead of Danser's 'fast forward' you want to see in full an epic discussion of the way Hollywood constructs modern day political myths – and the way recent American presidents have *followed* Hollywood precedents – then read John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett's masterful *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Indeed a week's output of TV and newspapers would suffice to enable any number of books analysing the myth-making processes underlying almost all aspects. We may not be accustomed to thinking of these as being myths – or, more

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accurately, fragments of bigger mythic meta-narratives which are rarely encountered in their entirety – but then few of us are accustomed to looking at the ‘lenses’ through which we view the world.

Back to the folk-whatevers – and the buckets

If the mass media create and promulgate the modern day myths, what about folklore and all the other folk-whatevers? If folk-whatevers are what bond social groups together then they too are key to understanding the social construction of reality. As already outlined, folk-whatevers were traditionally passed on by face-to-face discussions or re-enactments. However with the emergence of telephones and phonograms this became extended from face-to-face to a wider range of aural interactions. And the more recent emergence of informal text-based ‘conversations’, such as text messaging and emails, has greatly increased the ease and range of such ‘folkloric transmission’. I would go as far as to include blogging and personal Web sites into this category of ‘folkloric transmission’ as they are in clear contrast with all forms of ‘mediated’ communication (i.e. where some sort of editor or commercially-influenced ‘publisher’ has – at least in principle – an influence over what is said and to whom).

If, as I think is sensible, we take ‘folkloric transmission’ to include a wide range of Web-based activities then clearly ‘folkloric transmission’ is now an exceptionally important aspect of the processes of constructing our social reality.

So why is such folkloric transmission and in-depth assessment of the myth-making processes in contemporary culture largely ignored by those who study contemporary culture? With the exception of John Storey (and the late Roland Barthes), I am not aware of anyone in the realms of Cultural Studies who even thinks about the folkloric and mythic aspects of their discipline (although I would be most interested to hear from anyone who can dispute that remark). At the risk of mixing too many metaphors, it is as if Cults Studs simply want to ‘snapshot’ specific aspects of culture rather than take a video of the culture as a process – again, just the same as taking home a bucket of water is not the same as studying a whirlpool.

If I wasn’t so busy trying to run Heart of Albion I would enjoy delving further into the impact of Rorty’s and Bourdieu’s ideas on the social construction of reality, and especially the extent to which Taoism – which is usually translated as ‘way’ but has the sense of ‘process’ – offers insights into the nature of reality which Western philosophy (at least since

Heraclitus's death in 475 BC) has not effectively explored. If you want to delve into this territory for yourselves then an inspiring jumping off point would be two near-contemporary books: David L. Hall's *The Uncertain Phoenix* (Hall 1982) and N.J. Girardot's *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism* (Girardot 1983). There are a number of introductory overviews of Rorty and Bourdieu which will serve as guides to these authors' own work – see Brandom 2000; Festenstein and Thompson 2001; Vieth 2005; Grenfell and Hardy 2007.

Understanding everything

If we accept Heraclitus's dictum that the nature of everything is change itself then the processes which influence that change must be key to understanding 'everything'. In my opinion this places the study of myth and folkloric transmission fairly prominently in the process of understanding everything. However it does feel odd holding an opinion which seems so much at odds the approaches of those whose academic careers are based on studying aspects of 'everything'.

If all this seems rather too abstract, then let's get up close and personal with some specifics. I have already written about the invention of such concepts as nature, countryside, the rural idyll, heritage, etc in the opening chapter of my *Sacred Places: Prehistory and popular imagination* (Heart of Albion 2005). Although *Sacred Places* was drafted before encountering Danser's *The Myths of Reality*, it was substantially revised shortly after editing Danser's book and can be thought of as a specific 'case history' within the general framework of Danser's summary of how social reality is constructed. *Sacred Places* looks specifically at the construction of modern ideas about prehistoric sacred places, although takes in related topics such as the invention of the English rural idyll and the relationship between the 'Earth Mysteries' movement of the 1970s to 90s and modern paganism during the last twenty years.

Although not directly influenced by *The Myths of Reality*, the work of David Clarke and Andy Roberts shares an essentially similar approach to the construction of 'myths'. Their book, *Flying Saucerers* (Alternative Albion 2007) is another such 'case history' of this approach, looking in detail at how the 'myth' of UFOs was developed in Britain during the 60s and 70s by both 'enthusiasts' and key figures in the Establishment.

The construction of normality – the exclusion of the paranormal and ‘fortean’

UFOs are, almost by definition, one aspect of what is linked together as the ‘paranormal’. They sit alongside ‘channelled’ voices, ghosts, poltergeist, fairies, werewolves, vampires, phantom black dogs, mythic animals (such as dragons, unicorns or yeti), out-of-place animals (such as panthers in the British countryside), sightings of supposedly-extinct animals, showers of frogs or fish and a whole host of so-called ‘fortean’ phenomena.

Although a satisfactory blanket term has yet to be invented for them, other than ‘paranormal’ or ‘fortean’, what links them together – perhaps the only thing that links them together – is that they are deemed not to be ‘normal’. But this is nothing more than a self-defining logical circle. All social groups define themselves less by who is deemed ‘in’ than by who they *exclude* – from a group of office workers who intuitively exclude anyone who does not share the same in-jokes, through to nations or international religious organisations, which define themselves according to exclusions based on geography or creed. The social construction of ‘normality’ does not revolve around endless discussions about what is *accepted*; rather the boundaries are set by what is more-or-less explicitly *excluded*. The word ‘paranormal’ inherently helps define what is deemed ‘normal’ by this same process of exclusion (the *OED* defines paranormal as ‘observed phenomena or powers which are presumed to operate according to natural laws beyond or outside those considered normal or known’).

Whatever ‘paranormal researchers’ are doing they are also, unwittingly, confirming society’s concepts of normality. By fundamental definition paranormal phenomena can never become part of ‘normal’ – or ‘natural’ – laws. In practice all boundaries are contested and at different times in different cultures different aspects of what is deemed ‘paranormal’ will be more contentious than others. Self-evidently the 1960s to 1990s were when UFOs were at their most contentious – earlier sightings of ‘phantom dirigibles’ did not generate such attention and, with the decline of Cold War mythmaking predicated around the technology of warfare, the sometimes hysterical interest in ‘sky watching’ has subsided. Instead films such as *Alien* and TV series such as the *X-Files* reflected the emergent war-on-terror myth and the fear that the ‘enemy is within’ or, at least, the enemy is barely distinguishable from the good guys.

Fairies and princesses – classic folklore versus contemporary folklorists

In the days before UFOs were invented, people still reported encountering ‘aliens’. They had a variety of names – such as trolls, elves, pixies, brownies, boggarts, leprechauns plus an entire army of dialect variations, and even a number of euphemisms, such as ‘the wee folk’ – but the collective term ‘fairies’ has generally been used for over a hundred years. Fairies reputedly lived in hollow hills rather than hollow saucers – although since the set designers for *Teletubbies* subverted that distinction, we now have a generation of young adults who perhaps think extraterrestrials live in hollow hills too.

Like all myths and folktales, ‘fairy lore’ can be seen to be both a product of underlying cultural beliefs and also a key way in which those beliefs are transmitted – and, over time, challenged and changed. Strip away the Victorian nursery tale writers who made fairies wee and twee, and adorned them with gossamer wings, and you see a much darker world of fairy, one where fairies were as big as normal adults, bad tempered, always dangerous-to-know and often treacherous or best avoided. They were the ‘bogeymen’ of early modern Europe. How beliefs in fairies fitted into earlier British societies – and, if only by the sustained interest, how they fit into modern perceptions of the past – is revealed in Jeremy Harte’s exemplary book *Explore Fairy Traditions* (Explore Books 2004). My own admiration for this book is not an anomaly – it won the Folklore Society’s annual book award. If the idea of wee and twee fairies puts you off, then read this book. Firstly it will reveal the entirely different dark world of traditional fairy lore. Secondly it is masterclass in how to think – and write about – traditional folklore in an entirely contemporary manner.

Excellent and innovatory in somewhat different ways is Brendan McMahon’s *The Princess Who Ate People* (Heart of Albion 2006). By combining a deep knowledge of Irish myth with his expertise as a practising psychotherapist, McMahon shows that these traditional tales offer ‘life cycle narratives’ – such as how to deal with adolescence, bereavement and such like – in ways which he considers are much more powerful than, say, those offered by Freudian therapies. Again, both a re-interpretation of traditional lore in the light of modern day thinking and also a ‘prescriptive’ example of how myth and lore can beneficially structure our sense of self.

Both Harte and McMahon step beyond looking at the ‘function’ of traditional lore in modern society and instead reveal the creation of the

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meaning and significance of such lore. However, such approaches need not be applied only to fairy tales and Irish myths. As the next section discusses, such folkloric approaches are also appropriate with more contemporary topics.

The role of out-of-place animals in constructing normality

Cryptozoology – the study or ‘imaginary’ or out-of-place animals – is a curious overlap of social mythmaking, folklore and zoology. As Paul Williams shows in *Howls of Imagination: Wolves of England* (Heart of Albion 2007), wolves got a seriously ‘bad press’ at the hands of medieval Christian theologians and this myth persisted into nineteenth century fairy tales and subsequent horror stories and films. The number of wolf attacks on humans makes them less dangerous than elephants – and much less dangerous than tigers or hippos – yet few if any horror stories feature the threat from elephants, tigers or hippos. Medieval mythmaking set the stage for modern day preconceptions of fear – and fantasy.

Medieval bestiaries can be seen as the origin for a number of mythic ideas which are current today – such as ‘wily’ foxes and ‘proud’ lions. Peter Heseltine’s book *A Bestiary of Brass* (Heart of Albion 2006) takes an unconventional approach by combining this medieval folklore with contemporary illustrations of the beasts concerned – as they were depicted on memorial brasses, providing a curious crossover between folklore, iconography and art history.

Unconventional in a different way is Richard Freeman’s take on dragons. Starting from the copious folklore about these mythic creatures he then applies his zoological and cryptozoological expertise and tries to identify if real – albeit somewhat anomalous and probably now locally-extinct – creatures could have been the inspiration for these legends. The result is his book *Explore Dragons* (Explore Books 2006).

Likewise starting from folklore but with a vast number of credible witness sightings to assist her enquiries, Merrily Harpur’s investigation into *Mystery Big Cats* (Heart of Albion 2006) also explores the overlap with other paranormal phenomena and strongly-held opinions that such out-of-place animals are living in Britain.

Much less certain is the status of phantom black dogs. Sightings of a broadly similar nature are known throughout Europe and – as Simon Burchell reveals in *Phantom Black Dogs of Latin America* (Heart of Albion 2007) – in Spanish-speaking South America also. *Explore Phantom Black Dogs* (Explore Books 2005) was the first book-length study of these

frequently-attested phenomena. Indeed one of the most useful parts of the book is a bibliography of sightings. Another chapter is devoted to emails from people who have seen these phantoms – in other words, ‘firsthand folklore’ rather than folklore recorded by, say, nineteenth century collectors and subsequently repeatedly regurgitated in print.

I list these books not so much to create an annotated catalogue of Heart of Albion publications in recent years but rather to show that current approaches to even a specific ‘genre’ of folklore – mythic and out-of-place animals – can be varied and are certainly distinct from simply collecting them as ‘static’ stories and listing them in county-by-county ‘collections’. Such an out-of-date ‘butterfly collector’s’ perception of folklore research is at odds with the actuality of current folklore research, with its emphasis on the transmission (or ‘process’) of folk-whatevers, in the same way that zoologists do not merely collect butterflies or whatever but instead study lifecycles, habitat, ecological ‘niches’, and all the rest.

Folkloric research into mythic and out-of-place animals reveals the role that they have been given over the centuries as part of the construction of ‘normality’. Our modern day fascination with these same myths and species reveals much about how such lore endures as well as how it is adapted by authors, screenwriters and directors.

Folklore and fully-formed horror

Once folklore and legend is approached more as a ‘process’ then some of the more enduring themes can be looked at from the perspective of how they have developed over time. Of special interest is how fantasy writers and their counterparts in the world of film have developed the genre of horror monsters, and the extent to which these myths reflect – and often perpetrate – underlying fears and fantasies. Clearly Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is fuelled by a fear of what nineteenth century science seemed all-but-capable of achieving. Films such as *Alien* and *ET* share the central theme of ‘aliens among us’ but are differentiated by one manifesting fearfully in a futuristic setting while the other was a seemingly-benign ‘pixie’ within the safety of an iconic domestic home. It is fair to say that we construct our fears according to our underlying beliefs. If we believe that the home should be inviolable then an extraterrestrial in its midst is transgressive – even if there is cute humour in the subplot of *ET* wishing to communicate with his own home.

Extraterrestrials in our own homes have their folkloric precedents, not least with the idea that ghosts and the ‘undead’ in some sense share our physical

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space. In *Explore Vampires* (Explore Books 2007) Bob Curran shows how revenants have featured in legends ever since Classical Greece. The fears of imagined encounters with these undead however changed as the Catholic medieval era evolved into the Reformation and then early modern Rationalism. However all such evolutions are as nothing compared to the successive influences of fiction writers and filmmakers over the last 150 years.

Both Bob Curran and Paul Williams in his book on wolves venture into the equally enduring mythic territory of werewolves, showing again that folklore evolves according to the fears – and underlying myths – of societies. In traditional lore werewolves sometimes seem to equate to a euphemism for outlaws – or even perhaps paedophiles. Indeed in early written versions of Little Red Riding Hood, it is the sexual rather than nutritive appetite of the granny/werewolf which is explicitly revealed, although nineteenth century bowdlerisation soon subverted that. As ever, the meaning and significance of such tales was almost certainly much deeper than the superficial subject matter suggests – and no doubt both pluralistic and capable of rapid change.

In addition to such well-known horror genres as vampires and werewolves, there are aspects of ‘normality’ which are neither especially normal, nor usually approached from the perspective of folklore or myth. Michael Hallowell’s *Invizikids* (Heart of Albion 2007) is an innovative study of ‘invisible’ childhood friends (or, as he prefers to term them, ‘quasi-corporal companions’) based on cross-cultural interviews. He not only fundamentally questions almost all the prior assumptions about what such imaginary friends are – both from a psychological and paranormal perspective – but also raises some serious questions about why parents are usually happy for their children to play frequently with these strange and unknown entities, whereas the presence of a real-life stranger might trigger a near-hysterical response. *Invizikids* is a perceptive and pioneering study which, in quite a different way to say the study of mythic animals, shows how society constructs what is deemed to be ‘threatening’ or ‘acceptable’ and ‘normal’.

F&M and the British counterculture

Two somewhat overlapping areas of modern British counterculture provide excellent examples of how ideas can be transmitted – and, most certainly, adapted – without any significant involvement by the mass media. The first of these is one specific approach to ‘alternative’

archaeology known among its aficionados as 'earth mysteries'. The second is the broad spectrum of ideas which come together as 'modern paganism'.

Modern paganism is slightly the older, evolving in the 1940s and 50s out of early twentieth century magical orders such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Servants of the Light, and the more esoteric lodges of Freemasons – all with their roots in H.P. Blavatsky's theosophy movement. In the later 1950s the boundaries began to come down between pioneering modern paganism and the hitherto quite distinct (and, until then, distinctly un-pagan) Druidic revival groups that dated back to the nineteenth century. Once the 1960s counter-culture began to take off then modern paganism and 'exotic' Eastern beliefs intermingled to create something of the blend of ideas at the core of modern paganism to this day. In the 1980s powerful feminist influences challenged some of the underlying 'myths' of this pagan movement, and other pagans actively incorporated ideas from shamanism or historic Scandinavian paganism. Simultaneously eco-politics were coming to the fore, and many pagans readily included the 'green' ethos into their spirituality.

Until the 1960s and, to a lesser extent during the 1970s, most people acquired their initial knowledge about modern paganism from a short shelf of books written by a handful of writers. However by the 1980s this had begun to change. These pioneering books were still there, but shorn of any 'canonical' status. The flow of ideas arose among fifteen or twenty privately-produced magazines, most of which had circulations in the hundreds. Few pagans would see more than four or six of these magazines on a regular basis, but contributors tended to write for several publications and to comment on each other's ideas, so the flow of similar ideas and debate reached most of the 'zines. These 'zine editors were often active in producing booklets which developed specific ideas or offered practical 'how to do it' advice with an affordable cover price. Again the print runs would rarely exceed a few hundred.

During the 1990s the 'zines mostly still survived but were augmented by monthly lectures (typically in each of the county towns) and annual conferences (both in London and key provincial locations), and then with an ever-increasing number of 'pub moots' where those curious about pagan beliefs could meet in reassuringly 'safe' places. Add to this the rituals – most pagans celebrate eight times a year, although some women's groups also follow a lunar cycle – and the opportunities for 'folkloric transmission' (although few, if any, of those involved would recognise the

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term) were legion. Many of the underlying ‘myths’ (the ‘deep structures’ of modern paganism) may ultimately have been generated by a shelf of books in the 1960s but their transmission – and extensive adaptation – was not happening in books, and still less through anything which resembled the mass media.

The ‘earth mysteries’ movement was also a child of the 1960s counter-culture (although the name ‘earth mysteries’ was not adopted until many years after the key ideas had developed). Its pioneers met in the UFO clubs of the late 50s and 60s and, as with modern paganism, most people became aware of the ideas from a handful of books whose authors – principally John Michell, Janet and Colin Bord and Paul Screeton – could be counted on one hand. Again booklets by a wide range of other writers quickly supplemented the flow of ideas, along with a few limited-circulation magazines. During the 1980s regional ‘earth mysteries groups’ produced magazines, organised field trips and sometimes annual conferences. Although not all members of these groups might be considered characteristic of the ‘counterculture’, field trips could mix dowsers, psychics and modern pagans with fairly ‘straight’ amateur local historians and archaeologists.

Earth mysteries was always a ‘fringe’ approach to the past, but followers distanced themselves from the ‘lunatic fringe’ of ‘pyramidiots’, Atlantean questers and a whole bandwagon of ideas that followed in the wake of Eric von Däniken’s *The Chariots of the Gods*. Earth mysteries was nevertheless anathema to the positivistic ethos of academic archaeology in the 1970s and early 80s, so – unjustly perhaps – deemed part of the ‘lunatic fringe’ by those who did not trouble themselves to become acquainted with the many distinct ‘fringe’ ideas circulating outside academe.

Right from the outset ‘earth mysteries’ included the traditional folklore and legends associated with natural places and prehistoric sites (one of the key sources of folklore about natural places, *The Enchanted Land* by Janet and Colin Bord, was reprinted as a fully-illustrated edition by Heart of Albion in 2006). It most certainly developed its own myths – such as aligned sites and dowsable ‘energy lines’ – but there was a broad spectrum of ideas and underlying ideologies. Despite the sometimes strident efforts of the long-standing editor of the key national magazine to get fellow enthusiasts to follow whatever particular approach he was currently excited by, a healthy pluralism of ideas persisted, with the main exchange of ideas taking place in the regional magazines and during their fieldtrips.

During the 1970s and into the 80s one of the few opportunities for modern pagans to meet up with earth mysteries enthusiasts and, indeed, the whole spectrum of British counterculture, was at the various 'free festivals' which took place at various locations throughout Britain, although the hub of this ritual cycle was undoubtedly the summer solstice festival at Stonehenge. (Among the early instigators of the free festival movement were a bunch of anarchists who – inspired by William Blake – styled themselves 'Albion Free State'; by a somewhat circuitous path this led to the adoption of 'Heart of Albion' as the name for my publishing activities when they started in 1989.)

After sustained attempts by the tabloid press to discredit the participants, the free festival movement was violently attacked at the so-called 'Battle of the Beanfield' in 1986 at roughly the same time Margaret Thatcher contrived vicious attacks on the miners and print unions. Nevertheless Stonehenge remains an icon of the British counterculture. There is little point in trying to summarise here the way Stonehenge has acted as the focus of countercultural 'myths' as Andy Worthington's book *Stonehenge: Celebration and subversion* (Alternative Albion 2004) has done a superb job of exploring this. Andy shows that, despite extensive media attention, the countercultural 'mythos' was developed and communicated by processes that I would term 'folkloric'.

Although the free festival scene is no more, and earth mysteries reduced to a pale shadow of its former self, modern paganism goes from strength to strength. Anyone interested in researching folklore transmission of ideas 'as they happen' would do well to focus their attention on the different strands that make up paganism in Britain today.

Looking at the lenses

Q: What is the dominant metaphor of the age – any age?

A: What that age accepts as literal.

Aphorism reported by Raymond Williams

The purpose of this booklet has been to outline that folklore and mythology – even though we may not think of them as such – are as integral to modern societies as we customarily think they are to more traditional worldviews. Indeed, not only are they integral to modern thinking, but they provide the 'deep structures' – up to and including our philosophical models of what we take to be 'reality' – and an increasingly important aspect of the transmission of those 'deep structures'.

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When we talk about other people's 'deep structures' we refer to them as 'myths', 'ideologies', 'creeds' and suchlike. In contrast, our own 'deep structures' are often unquestionable 'givens' which create a belief system in which these ideas are indisputably true and often followed literally. Yet to someone who steps outside those 'deep structures' – in other words, looks at the spectacles through which the world is seen – then such literalism seems at best farcical and all too often dangerously fanatical. Not for nothing has it been said that 'By myth man has lived, died and – all too often – killed.' (Puhvel 1987: 2)

Folk-whatevers still include the continuation of such traditional customs as the Abbots Bromley Horn dance, which help to define both the identity of the village and the sort of people who attend traditional folk customs. However the in-jokes shared in an office, or the 'transgressive' rituals of stag and hen nights, just as equally serve to bond – and implicitly if not explicitly – exclude people who are not part of that 'in group'. Such 'folkloric transmission' is key to understanding how mythic ideas adapt and transform, and especially to understanding how ideas not being promulgated by the mass media and developed and shared.

Looking back over the titles published by Heart of Albion during the last six years reveals that aspects of traditional 'folk-whatevers' can be looked at anew from a modern perspective, as with many of the titles in the Explore Books series. Key aspects of British contemporary culture can also be studied with the emphasis on the way meaning and significance have been constructed, as with the titles that have appeared under the Alternative Albion imprint. In the next few years I hope these approaches become the basis of a much larger collection of such research and, more importantly, inspire the readers of the books to look, so to speak, *at* the lenses rather than *through* the lenses, and to see that the 'deep structures' of all societies are metaphors rather than literal truths.

Acknowledgements

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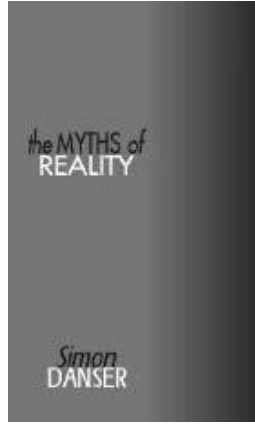
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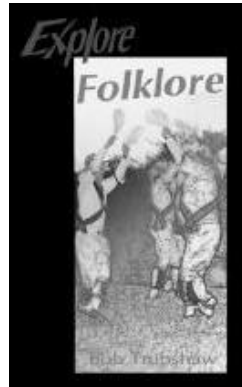
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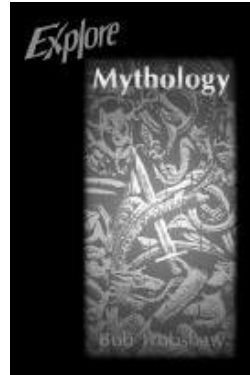
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