

# gods in the machine

**T**here are gods here too," said Heracleitos when visitors found him at the cooking fire. The ancient Greeks positioned their gods not "everywhere" but in quite specific locations, and the Obscure One may have simply extended the common practice. Each ancient city had its designated patron and protector: Athena at Athens, Demeter at Eleusis, Hera at Argos, Artemis at Ephesus and so on.

Medieval and later Christian cities also localized the Virgin or saint as an official patron who was selected out of the heavenly multitudes, as we still see in the names of towns like Saint-Denis and San Diego, St. Pölten and L.A. (El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles). While each town claims a favorite deity, there is still plenty of room for devotion to other heavenly helpers. Though each ancient city celebrated its patron, each city also built a capacious pantheon to house all the gods and goddesses so that citizens could, if they wished, cultivate their own personal piety beyond the public celebrations of the municipal deity. Overwhelming powers send their energizing forces through specific channels. The screen of transcendence reveals many points of view cast by our multiple finite projectors.

We project on the vast screen of transcendence our current hopes, dreams, fears and aspirations. The screens of the virtual realm today display many myths, including myths about Google, Yahoo and YouTube. Hardly a day passes when we do not read news stories about these companies. Over the horizon hovers the power of information search, of infinite cataloging, of unlimited video libraries. These powers promise to shape future energies as civilization assumes new forms. We localize these powers by assigning to them the familiar names of companies on the stock exchange that have their employees, quarterly reports and investors.

Yet these companies remain mythical, as Joseph Campbell defines mythology: symbols that point beyond themselves. Myths are ways in which the psyche organizes its experiences of change.

**Mythology provides** numinous names to help us grasp the mystery of transformation while we are coordinating our perceptions and re-configuring our life and work to fit the emerging culture. The dynamic shifts we formerly followed in names like IBM, Microsoft and Apple now appear not so much in the marketplace of hardware manufacture but in the competitive realm of data access. While the gigantomachia was once a "battle of giants" about Microsoft and Apple, we now ponder powers like Google, Yahoo and YouTube. Our stories focus on the transition of media to venues like cell

phones, computer screens and portable DVD players. The physical fact of the Internet may encompass an enormously complex array of glass, liquid crystal, telephone lines, earth-orbiting satellites, keyboards, fingers, eyes and brains. Yet beyond the accumulated energy of communication is a process of myth-making – which is as pivotal to contemporary culture as the story of the Iliad was to the legacy cultures that received war stories about "swift-footed Achilles" and "wise-counseling Nestor."

The narratives are projecting a style of future culture as much as they are telling us Ranke's *Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*. The big screen of transcendence reveals the metamorphoses of our myth-making.

**Like Zeus and his Olympians**, our telecom gods fight, mate and carry on like passionate, flawed humans. The myth of pirate rivalry between the youthful Bill Gates and Steve Jobs is not an edifying story unless told by company hagiographers. Competitive cleverness is a god-like virtue in capitalism as well as in Nordic tales (think of Wagner's Wotan, Loge and angry Fricka).

Of course, factual content does in fact matter in the end, but we must not forget that much of the narrative myth-making comes to us through the voices of the personae themselves. We learn the news through Google, Yahoo and, to some extent now, YouTube. The merger of big telecom also means a more unified story with a thinner storyline.

In all the mergers, we should not forget that cyberspace is "haunted." In the 1980s, the cyberpunk novelist William Gibson told formative tales that included "Loa" or "voodoo gods." The original designers of cyberspace did not plan these random actors in the matrix. They were rather loose parts of larger intelligent structures which broke off and became agents on their own, defying prediction and introducing wild cards into the game: "Yeah, there are such things out there, ghosts, voices. Why not? Oceans had mermaids, and we have a sea of silicon."

As marketing geniuses rationally re-organize a faltering music industry and lawyers engineer a more adequate copyright law, we should remain on the lookout for those tiny bits of larger structures that break off and refuse to obey the obvious rules. There are the ghosts and magic voices out there that may invent new stories, unheard-of tales, for which we have no story as yet. To stick only to the old stories may cause us to miss the wise man's surprising gesture: "There are gods here too." He also warned: "Expect the unexpected!" ■

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## KURZFASSUNG

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