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#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

Axis Mundi: A Pedagogical Exploration of the Decolonising Potential of Mythology

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Abstract

The postmodern condition is such that economies, globalisation, technologies and societal norms have undergone drastic changes and rapid progressions. All of which has made an undeniable impact on the state and function of contemporary education. In a world now orientated towards a “knowledge-based economy”, it becomes ever more pertinent to grapple with not only how knowledge is defined but also how knowledge is constructed and acquired. The #Decolonise movement makes a call for a knowledge based economy that can be understood as vernacular in nature – knowledge structures that are relatable or relevant to specific regional or cultural origins.

This poses an immense challenge to educators. How do educators equip learners with an educational foundation that incorporates vernacular wisdom in the form of site-specific social, psychological and cultural character as well as prepares students to successfully and meaningfully navigate an increasingly globalised (life)world? One of the significant challenges posed to education by #Decolonise is that of establishing a balance which generates and maintains pedagogical value.

This paper proposes a theoretical exploration which offers potential resolve in the form of Mythology. Mythologies function as cultural narratives which are rife with vernacular wisdom used to gain insights into abstract conceptions and provide pragmatic guidance towards courses of action. Mythologies across cultures manifest similar motifs and morals and in this way mythology may also hold the potential to bridge the gap between vernacular wisdom and universal value.

As such mythology is established in the paper as a socio-cognitive constructivist pedagogy in accordance with the developmental learning theories put forth by Piaget (1977). Through a framework of dialectic and analogy, mythology is employed to explain how decolonised knowledge may be created and acquired. The argument presented further suggests that this mythological pedagogical approach is possibly already internalised by design practice. This in turn situates design education at the forefront of a decolonised knowledge ecology.

Keywords:

Mythology, Constructivism, Socio-Cognitive Pedagogy, Design Practice, Knowledge Boundaries, Imagination

Introduction

One of the most commonly recurring motifs in world mythology is that of the *Axis Mundi* – a cosmic “Centre”. Mircea Eliade (1991, p. 39) notes that “Every Microcosm, every inhabited region, has a Centre; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all”. The centre is the locus of divine intervention, where opposing planes meet, intersect and can be transcended. The *Axis Mundi* serves as a connective thread along which communication between higher and lower realms are (re)established and disseminated. As such, the *Axis Mundi* is most often represented as a vertical axis in its various symbolic cultural iterations: the Caduceus or Rod of Hermes in Greek Mythology, various mountain summits in Eastern religions, architectural structures of ancient civilization like the pyramids of Egypt and the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, the leather braid or spiders web that bind together heaven and earth in Nilo-Saharan mythology, the Yggdrasil or World Tree in Norse Mythology, the Bodhi Tree in Buddhism and the Tree of Knowledge in Eden from Judeo-Christian tradition (Cirlot 1971). This recurring mythological symbol serves as a useful metaphor for the linking power of mythology itself, as is to be explored in this paper. The decolonising potential of mythology lies in its ability to connect the personal to the collective, the vernacular to the global, the old to the new and the sacred to the profane. Thus, mythology is situated as centre around which the arguments here are presented as well as a pillar or axis with which to bridge conceptual divides in decolonial discourse within the field of education. As such vertical imagery occurs in both the explanations and diagrams that inform and support the content presented here. The aesthetic and execution of the diagrams relate to the argument put forth in the paper - to use fantasy/imagination drawing from vernacular knowledge (mythologies) to re-imagine new learning in a way that transcends the existing limitations of colonial productions.

This paper aims to address the question of decolonisation by proposing a tri-reciprocal model for higher education in creative fields. This model can be envisioned as a triangular diagram (figure 1) in which each corner of the triangle represents a particular aspect of the model. The proposed aspects of the model are *Socio-Cognitive Constructivist Pedagogy* (as informed by the works of Jean Piaget (1977) and Lev Vygotsky (1962).), *Mythology* (as defined by Joseph Campbell (1972, 1978), Roland Barthes (1957) and Jordan B. Peterson (1999) and *Design Praxis*. The links between each corner or node of the triangle are multidirectional rather than hierarchical. The proposed model intends to establish a theoretical structure in which there is a continuous and reciprocal flow of information and value between each aspect and meaningful knowledge is both acquired and created in the centre. The intention of this paper is to situate decolonised education as accommodative. Accommodation in this context, in a Piagetian sense, does not refer to coddling. It refers to the transformation of students’ internal knowledge structures and adjusting ideation and conceptualisation in order to make sense of the world (Schunk 2012). It is asserted that a decolonised social ecology, particularly within the field of design, is formulated in a loose framework – loose not because it is undeveloped but rather because the boundaries are permeable. This is what #Decolonise calls for: an opening or loosening of physical, social and ideological borders particularly within higher education.

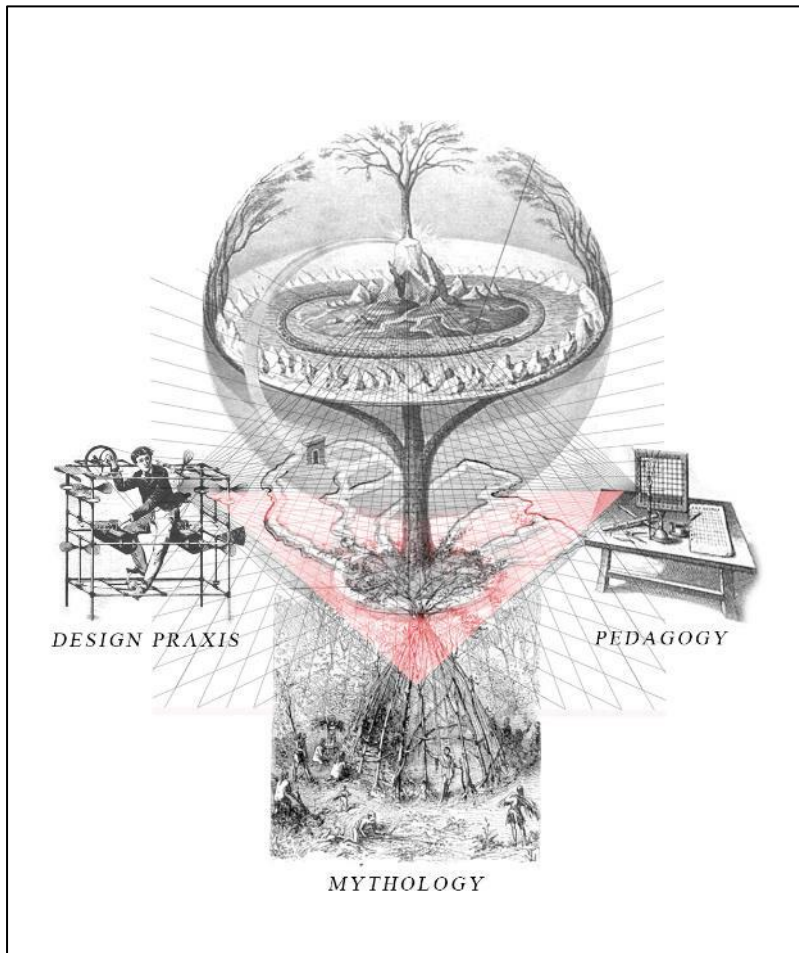


Figure 1 Tri-reciprocal Model: Mythology, Pedagogy & Design Praxis (Author, 2017).

Background (Defining the Challenge of Decolonisation)

I take my starting point from the now infamous student panel discussion which occurred mid October 2016 at the University of Cape Town. The most memorable moment to emerge from the two hour meeting is a viral 4 minute video clip in which a member of the “Shackville TRC” makes several assertions which form the foundation of the overarching call that “Science must fall” (Henderson 2016).

The video clip was met with widespread debate and largely dismissive and often sarcastic responses most evident in the slew of posts across social media platforms bearing the #ScienceMustFall hashtag. However, when certain postulations made by the speaker are isolated, several points of entry emerge through which we can begin to access and unpack the larger #Decolonise discourse. Below I highlight the soliloquy that speaks to issues faced by global perspectives in education.

There is a place in KZN called Umhlab'uyalingana. They believe that through the magic, you call it black magic, they call it witchcraft, you are able to send lightening to strike someone ... Western knowledge is totalising ... So western modernity is the problem that decolonisation directly deals with. It's to say that we are going to decolonise by having knowledge that is produced by us, that speaks to us and that is able to accommodate knowledge from our perspective. (Henderson 2016)

The above calls attention to the current state of education and highlights the impacts and challenges posed by globalisation and the internationalisation of academic curricula. Slabbert et al. (2009) highlight the fact that the world we currently live in has undergone drastic changes and the new conditions and perspectives posed by the postmodern era manifest themselves within the education system. Shifts in broad cultural frameworks such as economies, globalisation, technologies and societal norms filter down to classroom level and impacts on both the purpose and functioning of education. The post-modern era has produced a “knowledge-based economy” (Slabbert et al. 2009). When the #Decolonise discourse is sympathetically unpacked, particularly within the realm of higher education, one is able to discern a call for such an economy that incorporates vernacular knowledge and wisdom - ‘vernacular’ in terms of knowledge structures that are relatable or relevant to specific regional or cultural origins.

The challenge posed to us as educators today is that of finding balance. How do we as educators equip students with an educational foundation that incorporates the social and psychological character of their cultures, vernacular wisdom as well as prepares students to successfully and meaningfully navigate an increasingly globalised (life)world?

This challenge is perhaps even more pertinent to those in the field of art and design education. As educators and practitioners in the field of art and Design we hold an advantage over our peers in less creative disciplines and that is a familiarity (and perhaps even a preoccupation) with breaking from previously established traditions, overhauling strict canons that have outlasted their relevance and reimagining aesthetic vocabularies when we find dead visual languages no longer function as appropriate modes of communication. Art and design history illustrate the creative compulsion toward reinvention and reimagining (Groys 2009). Each movement altering its definitions, ideologies and productions, consciously unravelling its own ontology through its praxis and subsequently threading itself back together in reformation. Observations of the (r)evolution of stylistic and ideological movements within art and design praxis underscore the fluid and cyclical tenets the field (Groys 2009).

Defining Mythology

Myth is often denounced as fallacy and this is, to my mind, a most unfortunate mis-categorisation as it undermines the wealth of value one can begin to derive from this particular cognizance. Within the context of this paper and the argument put forth, it is crucial that myth is situated as a form of knowledge rather than as a form of untruth. Mythologies can be understood as cultural narratives – embodiments of cultural wisdom, wisdom that is more phenomenological than it is empirical. These narratives often contain clearly recognisable patterns and motifs across a diversity of cultures. The identification of these patterns speaks to Jung’s (1968) theories of collective conscious, collective memory and inheritable memory and while the content of these narratives may differ, the underlying structure and purpose of these social narratives remain fairly universal as is substantiated by the following assertion:

We have spent hundreds of thousands of years watching ourselves act, and telling stories about how we act, in consequence. A good story has a universal quality, which means that it speaks a language we all understand. Any universally comprehensible language must have universal referents, and this means that a good story must speak to us about those aspects of experience that we all share (Peterson 1999, p. 83).

It is exactly these commonalities within diversion that situate myth as an ideal mechanism to address the call for a model of education that is both culturally specific and globally relevant. With this understanding in place one can begin to view myth as more than just

literary production. Instead, this paper proposes that mythology can be seen as a multiplicity of meaning and thought. Mythology therefore functions simultaneously as both system and tool. These functions are not exclusive, rather they operate in a symbiotic manner.

Barthes (1957) posits mythology as a semiotic system into which individuals are born(e). Similar to language, mythology exists in historical and social contexts - as such the language of mythology or 'mythical speech' (Barthes 1957, p. 110) and its construction thereof is bound to its particular socio-historic moment. Mythology in this sense systematically orders individual and collective experience. It dictates what is normalised and how metaphysical, societal and pedagogical landscapes are navigated. Mythology as a systematic entity becomes evident in conscious and subconscious knowledge of and integration into spontaneous social order, popular culture and dominant ideology. In the context of this paper, mythology as system becomes a point of entry. It encapsulates what is familiar, that which is intrinsically or inherently known in the vernacular.

The process by which mythology transforms from system to tool is described as a continuous unfolding (Neumann & Hull 1989). Mythology as a consciously constructed system of the known expands beyond the boundaries of its own awareness, increasingly subsuming the unconscious - that which is unfamiliar, only partially known or entirely unknown. Beyond the boundaries of the vernacular known, mythology dissolves from existing as culturally or linguistically specific system into an omnicultural referent. That is to say that emphasis shifts from the acknowledgement of group differences to recognition of human commonalities. The mechanism which allows the transition from system to tool is analogy. When describing mythology as a tool, it becomes useful to refer to the interpretations of mythology put forth by Jung (1968) and Campbell (1972, 1988). While both regard mythology as a very particular type of speech or language (myth as system) both are acutely aware of the functional aspects of myth. Mythologies are vernacular in so far as they are reflections of the cultures from which they originate, they express the concerns and core values of that culture and provide reassurance and guidance in the form of familiarity, however, it is well documented that despite changes in vernacular characteristics, overarching mythological narratives remain fairly similar across cultures and time periods (Campbell 1988). This familiarity, perhaps even universality, situates mythology as a type of lens through which one, regardless of cultural specificity, can begin to engage with aspects of the unfamiliar or unknown, broadening the boundaries of one's knowledge. Active conscious and unconscious recognition of that which can be considered the universal commonality of human experience is an essential part of bridging the gap between vernacular wisdom and global perspectives in education. This recognition also provides greater insights and sensitivities in how new knowledge territories are structured, ordered and navigated as will be illustrated in the exploration of mythology as pedagogy to be addressed later in the paper.

This dual understanding of mythology as both system and tool provides not only the most beneficial definition in the context of this paper but also highlights far broader poetics and potentiality of mythology in a cyclical sense. Campbell (1972, p. 14-15) expands on this premise originally put forth by Jung in saying:

Myths, states Jung, when correctly read, are the means to bring us back in touch. They are telling us in picture language of powers of the psyche to be recognized and integrated in our lives, powers that have been common to the human spirit forever, and which represent that wisdom of the species by which man has weathered millenniums. Through a dialogue conducted with... a study of myths, we can learn to know and come to terms with the greater horizon of our own deeper and wiser, inward self. And analogously, the society that cherishes and keeps its myths alive will be nourished from the soundest, richest strata of the human spirit.

It is with much consideration that I choose not to refer to specific cultural mythologies in this paper save for the brief allusion to the world tree reference in the title. This decision is made in the interest of keeping the paper decidedly unspecific, actively avoiding 'site specific' exemplars of mythology in order to speak to the premise of loosening (narrative) borders in the interest of situating thought at the core of the #Decolonise discourse. It is also impossible to address mythology of any culture with any amount of meaningful substance in a paper of this length. Even a narrowing of the topic to purely indigenous African mythologies does not allow for sufficient exploration of such immensely diverse cultural and linguistic productions as well as the intricacies of the overlaps between them. It is useful to acknowledge the fact that Africa has no singular mythological system (Lynch 2010), as Africa is not represented by a singular people, language or culture. In this way African mythology serves as a mirroring device to any other region contemplating the dialectic between what is vernacular and what is global. Similarly, on a global scale, the mythologies, ritual and cultural practices between different groups may differ, however, comparable motifs and connections can begin to be drawn. This is exactly the potentiality of mythology this paper aims to address.

Constructivist Learning Theories & Mythology as Pedagogy

Campbell (1988, p. 50) asserts that myth always serves at least one of four functions, namely: mystical, cosmological, sociological and pedagogical. On the latter he proclaims,

...there is a fourth function of myth, and this is the one that I think everyone must try today to relate to -- and that is the pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances. Myths can teach you that.

Before it is possible to explore the potential educational value of myth it is important to establish a theoretical framework in which to situate mythology as a pedagogical tool in accordance with traditional learning theories.

Constructivism is an interesting base from which to start in so far as it operates as a learning theory but this is perhaps subordinate to its functioning as an epistemology. In this way the theory allows itself a fair degree of self-reflexivity. Constructivism asserts that the world can be cognitively constructed in a multitude of ways and as such no lock on knowledge is absolute. Instead of situating singular knowledge as absolute truth, constructivism regards knowledge as a working supposition or a continual process of becoming rather than a fixed state (Piaget 1977). This concept is perhaps best illustrated in the image of a spiral (figure 2). Each person exists in a present in which their insights, cognitions and frames of references are supported by the prior (formal or informal) learning of the past. New knowledge is acquired/generated and existing ideas and conceptions gain complexity through reflection. A synthesis between old and new knowledge then occurs. This is a continuous process and as such constructivist learning theories can be seen as encouraging of the practice of life-long learning. This speaks to Vygotsky's concept of 'scaffolding' (Schunk 2012, p. 245-246). The concept of scaffolding will be returned to in the practical explanation of mythology's pedagogical potential. Constructivism acknowledges that beliefs and experiences vary and are therefore subjective. This is then extended to the recognition that if knowledge is to be understood as a product of cognition it too is equally personal and subjective.

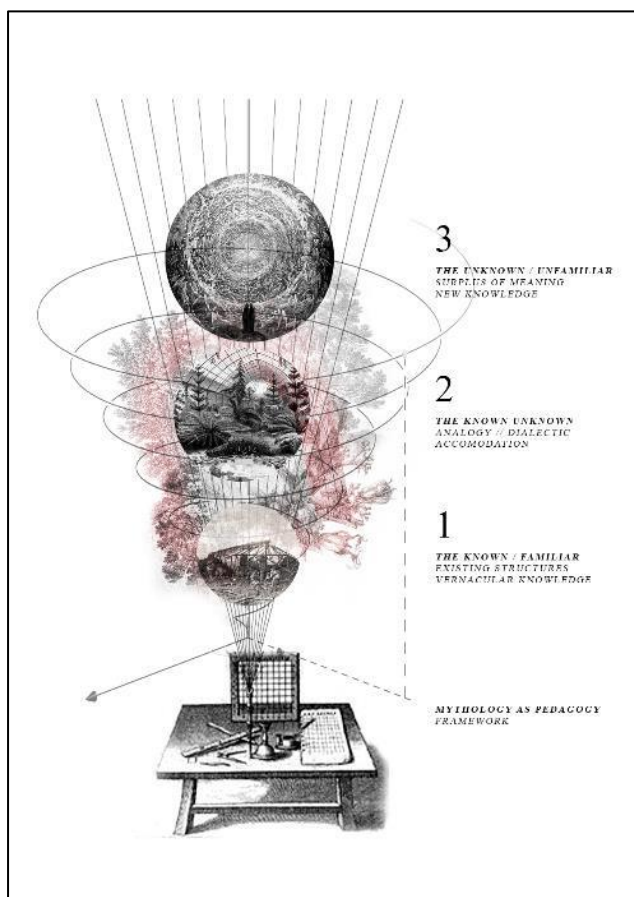


Figure 2 Piagetian Constructivist Knowledge Spiral (Author, 2017).

Constructivist pedagogy is most commonly divided into three perspectives namely: exogenous, endogenous and dialectical. Each of these perspectives offers insight into how the process of knowledge acquisition occurs (Schunk 2012). The exogenous perspective suggests that “knowing” can only be represented as internal reconstructions of the perceived external world. These reconstructions are influenced by subjective experience and modeled teaching and learning strategies. Endogenous perspectives draw from prior learning and not directly from situational contexts. In this way endogenous knowledge is not a representation of an externalised world but rather it is the development of cognitive abstraction. The dialectical perspective situates itself at the intersection of these two approaches in its suggestion that knowledge emerges from both subjective interactions between people (students) and their environments. Knowledge in this case is the result of cognitive paradoxes that occur throughout one’s interactions with the contextual environment. Dialectical approaches to constructivist learning align themselves closely with Vygotsky’s (1962) theories regarding the significant cognitive influence the cultural environment has on the acquisition and creation of knowledge, resulting in a blend of social cognitive constructivist pedagogy.

With this understanding of dialectical constructivist learning theory in place, a port of entry is opened through which to explore pedagogical potential of mythology. In practical terms the manner in which learning occurs would be structured as follows: students arrive with prior knowledge intact. These previously established knowledge structures are informed by mythology that is vernacular to them (myth as system). These knowledge structures (the known) are then challenged through dialectical pedagogy. In dialectic scenarios conceptions meet their opposite. This opposition is unfamiliar and moves learners beyond the boundaries of the known into the realm of the unknown. At this point Piagetian (1977) accommodation needs to occur. Internal knowledge structures must be reformed in order to accommodate

this new knowledge. Accommodation, however, is not a spontaneous process. In order for it to occur, learners must return to mythology in form of analogy (myth as tool) in order to make sense of newly perceived realities. Analogy serves as the core of both cognition and creativity in so far as fantasy is employed to order the unknown once learners arrive at the periphery of their (known) knowledge (Peterson 1999). Latent truths revealed through mythology bind dialectic oppositions and in this way analogical thinking transcends dialectic. Through this scaffolding process students arrive at a surplus of meaning which can be understood as the abundance of new knowledge, ultimately ascending to a higher level on the spiral of their cognition.

Framing Mythology within Design Praxis

The term *practicum* refers to the supervised practical application of previously acquired theory within a course of study. This notion is employed in many academic disciplines but is particularly pertinent to the field of design. This strategy within design education encourages learners to scaffold on prior (abstract) knowledge and in the process create new (experiential) knowledge – ultimately combining the two to meaningfully increase both cognitive abilities and situational insights (Eastman et al. 2001). *Design Praxis* within the context of this paper will refer to both the above mentioned supervised design practice of students as well as general practice - the ‘doing’ of design at the level of both education and industry.

For the purposes of this paper, the discipline of design is situated at the intersection of science and humanities. This assertion in turn suggests certain parameters in terms of areas of focus, application of relevant methodologies and the subsequent values of the field. These are key aspects to defining any type of pursuit which may be considered educational (Cross 2006). Where the sciences study the natural world and humanities concern themselves human experiences: design makes its focus the construction and navigation of both these entities. Science favours controlled and methodical experimentation and analysis while humanities employs more abstract methods in the form of analogy and qualitative evaluation: design finds synthesis between the two in the form of both literal and figurative modeling and pattern identification. Ultimately each discipline seeks to attain certain ideals. Science values objectivity, rationality and the pursuit of a singular truth while the humanities give weight to subjectivity and imagination: Again design reconciles these seemingly antithetical concerns in so far as valuing pragmatism, ingenuity and empathy.

While academia holds clear and divisive vocabulary to describe notions of what it is to be scientific and what it is to be creative, it begins to emerge that the discipline of design and all its subcategories is less easily reduced to such polarities. This combined knowledge in both its acquisition and construction is what Cross (2006) calls ‘Designerly ways of Knowing’. Another useful approach to defining design praxis or ‘Designerly ways of Knowing’ is in questioning what it does or how it manifests. *What is Design? What exactly do designers do? What is it we evaluate our students on their ability to do?* These musings all provide a point of entry through which one can begin to explore the immense complexities of the design discipline. A report issued by the Royal College of Art (1979, sp) encapsulated the issue, by stating that ‘Design with a capital ‘D’ articulates the collected experience of the material culture, and the collected body of experience, skill and understanding embodied in the arts of planning, inventing, making and doing’.

Based on the above it becomes discernible that Design, both at the level of education and industry, manifests an overarching concern with ‘the new’ and its material manifestations. The designerly preoccupation with the new brings us to a point of return to mythology’s pedagogical potentiality. The process through which prior knowledge meets dialectic and is resolved through mythology ultimately resulting in discovery, can be further expanded

through design. Design extends discovery to in(ter)vention. Cognitive gains manifest creation and/or derivation which bind new and old knowledge in a manner that is analogous to the process of accommodation described previously. Groys (2014) poses a theory of the *new* which comprises of two opposing aspects of cultural and artistic production. In this way dialectical thinking can once again be seen at work in the construction/acquisition of knowledge. The first aspect described is that of the 'cultural archive', similar in essence to the collective unconscious memory Jung (1968) described. The second, opposing aspect is that termed 'the profane' (Groys 2014, p. 64). The profane poses an irreconcilable opposition to the familiarity of the nostalgic recollection and in this way consolidates its newness. Between the realm of collective memory and the profane new exists only a permeable veil which can be understood as a value boundary (Groys 2014). As value boundaries shift so too does the perception of strangeness and newness resulting in a mode of adaptation or accommodation.

It is important to note that profane in(ter)vention occurs at the boundary of the known (existing knowledge). To transgress beyond the value boundary of what is known or understood is to become subject to archetypes of the collective unconscious. That is to say, in a classroom context, once students are pushed beyond their realm of competence they begin to use fantasy (myth as tool) to create and scaffold new knowledge structures. Upon reaching the periphery of what is already known, fantasy provides a path upon which to navigate and make sense of the unknown where the in(ter)vention of the new can manifest. In this way artists, designers and those engaged in creative disciplines already occupy the perimeters of existing knowledge structures as through their production they are able to transform absolute unknowns into multitudes of potential knowns. Mythology is therefore already internalized within design praxis because of the desire to produce/ reproduce/ create from referents, compelled by the drive to explore the unknown (myth as tool); this then also gives traction to how myth is congruent to cognitive development of the individual and collective unconscious (myth as system).

Conclusion

This remains a purely theoretical exploration of the potentiality of myth and does not address practical concerns such as how such a framework would be incorporated within higher education design curricula. In this way this research is limited but is in no way limiting. The call to #Decolonise education is not necessarily validated in mythology, rather mythology offers a means to rationalise the challenge differently. Mythology offers the #Decolonise discourse a locus of intervention in which thought is at its centre. Mythology as pedagogy facilitates shifts in educational interpretation rather than identification. That is to say, the inclusion of mythology in a decolonised education is not the dogmatic absorption of (vernacular or other) cultural knowledge but rather the reinterpretation and reimagination thereof. Mythology provides for us a frame to inhabit and be nurtured by. It is limited but not restrictive. It is a structure upon which one can expand and build boundlessly, the home from which we depart to begin our exploration as well as the place to which we ultimately return - 'a house is an instrument with which to confront cosmos' (Bachelard 1969, p. 46). With the tentative epistemological foundation mapped out in this paper and the dialogues between mythology, pedagogy and design highlighted, a limitless potential for the construction and acquisition new knowledge begins to emerge. To my mind, the above allows for #Decolonise to become meaningfully manifested both abstractly in philosophical explorations as well as practically in implementation.

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