

Section:

Mythologies of Europe: Re-imagining Crisis in the Space of Memory and New Identities

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Section language:

italian, english

Call for papers:

This panel aims to explore the modern configurations of the concept of myth in twentieth-century Europe, as it appears in the fields of philosophy, literature and cultural history. In contemporary European thought, myth reappears with renewed intensity in response to a double crisis: the decline of traditional religious frameworks and the secular instrumentalisation of myth for political ideologies. From the utopian vision of a classless society to the sinister myth of racial superiority, these symbolic narratives have contributed to both the progressive aspirations and the regressive movements of European modernity.

Myth thus becomes a marker of cultural and political complexity. On the one hand, it suggests a dangerous retreat from rationalism and a resurgence of pre-modern social structures. On the other hand, myth is nostalgically reclaimed as a response to the perceived poverty of meaning in modern materialist society. The problem of myth thus plays a crucial role in shaping the intellectual horizon of the twentieth century, especially in the human sciences. In philosophy, existentialism and phenomenology confront the crisis of the modern subject in a disenchanted world that has lost its connection with transcendence (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Jaspers, Kołakowski). In Italy, thinkers such as Benedetto Croce, Antonio Gramsci, Ernesto De Martino and Gustaw Herling reflect on Europe as a cultural and political space of freedom increasingly threatened by a new barbarism. Within this framework, myth is seen both as a threat to this space and as a potential foundation for a renewed European humanism.

Literature, both in narrative and poetic forms, addresses the myth through its symbolic power – through language's ability to condense collective emotions, archetypal images, and existential truths. A particularly significant contribution to this reflection comes from Cesare Pavese. In *Feria d'agosto*, Pavese articulates a poetics of myth as a timeless, spaceless reality – an *Urphänomen* in the Goethean sense – capable of endowing earthly experiences with depth and value. Myth, for Pavese, arises from the archetypal landscapes of childhood and from that primal moment of emotional recognition which he identifies as the only true form of knowledge. Not merely an emotional response, this *commozione* is an ecstatic self-erasure before the symbolic core of reality – akin to what the ethnologist Leo Frobenius described as *lived mythology*, the experience of being seized by the myth as a lived dimension of existence. In this sense, Pavese defines poetry itself as the act of *living myth*, the access to the innermost truth of human life. As he writes: "In order for an experience to have metaphysical value, it must escape time" (*Il mestiere di vivere*, 1952, p. 184). A similar tension between myth as danger and redemption animates the literary and philosophical work of Thomas Mann, particularly in novels such as *Der Zauberberg* and *Doktor Faustus*, where myth becomes a double-edged force: at once an aesthetic refuge from modern disillusionment and a harbinger of political and cultural regression. In Mann's modern mythology, the artist and intellectual are portrayed as figures torn between the lure of mythic timelessness and the ethical demands of historical consciousness – a dilemma at the heart of Europe's spiritual crisis.

From this perspective, poetry – in authors such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Celan, or Czesław Miłosz – may also be seen as a space where myth is reinvented. The poetic word becomes an act of symbolic re-inscription, allowing us to confront, rather than escape, historical trauma and existential dislocation. Whether as invocation, lament, or visionary language, poetry re-acts to myth by shaping new forms of symbolic order from the fragments of modernity.

Within this broader framework, the theme of the conference – Re-Action(s) – invites us to examine how myth functions as a form of response and transformation in the twentieth century and beyond. Does myth serve as a nostalgic retreat from modernity, or as a creative reactivation of meaning? Can it act as a vehicle for cultural resistance, or does it reproduce mechanisms of ideological control? How do literary and philosophical works re-act to myth – through criticism, revival, or transformation?

Research questions:

Philosophy of Myth: How does philosophical thought (existentialist, phenomenological, Marxist, etc.) interpret and redefine myth? How do different philosophical traditions (e.g., existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism) conceptualise the return or persistence of myth in a secular context? How do ethnographic and anthropological perspectives (e.g., De Martino, Frobenius) intersect with literary and philosophical discourses on myth?

Crisis of Myth / Myth of Crisis: How has myth been politically reappropriated during the upheavals of twentieth-century Europe? Can myth itself become a response to crisis, or even the very expression of it? In what ways did twentieth-century European thinkers and writers reinterpret myth as a response to the perceived crisis of modernity? How does the concept of myth function as both a reactionary and creative force in cultural and political narratives of the twentieth century?

The Myth of Europe: What role does myth play in the construction or destabilisation of European identity between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? What role does myth play in the construction of collective memory, identity, and the imaginary of Europe?

New Mythologies: How do concepts such as reason, science, technology, progress, globalisation, and “the end of history” function as modern or postmodern myths? To what extent does myth serve as a space of re-action in which modern culture negotiates its fears, hopes and transformations? How do literary works (novels, poetry, essays) re-act to myth – by subverting, reactivating, or reconfiguring it? What is the relationship between myth and language in modern literature: how does the poetic word become a vehicle for archetypal truths?

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