

Eternals and Western Mythology

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Marvel's 2021 film *Eternals* presents a new mythology for a new century, for an audience grappling with the complexity of postcolonialism and concerned about resurging white nationalism. Its mythology, while rooted in Western narratives, presents a utopia in the form of a multicultural pantheon, presented by a carefully selected, diverse class. While Marvel undoubtedly has commercial concerns, its careful construction of this new mythology and the considered adaptation process show a moral vision for the future. Importantly, this vision presents a direct contrast to the resurgence of the appropriation of classical mythology as justification for white supremacy. Marvel's *Eternals* therefore can be seen as utopian: it offers the perfection of moral predictability, of good triumphing over evil. However, it simultaneously undercuts its story by couching it in the genre of a comic book superhero fantasy adventure—the reality *Eternals* offers, even fictionally, is beyond ordinary, mortal humans.

mythology

superhero

Marvel

nationalism

1. Introduction

Marvel's 2021 film *Eternals*, directed by Chloé Zhao ([Zhao 2021](#)), cherry-picks pieces of Western canonical mythological, historical, and literary traditions, assembles a global cast whose nationalities or heritage can be read as comments on a postcolonial world, and then compiles these elements into a new, highly politicized form of myth. Roland Barthes and Joseph Campbell have theorized the notion of a new mythology as a way to imagine ancient models fitting into modern society. Marvel introduces this tension in *Eternals* in that the Western literary and historical narrative it uses is inherently exclusionary, but the chosen actors present a more global perspective, enabling the film to reclaim some of the individual power taken away by nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism.

Eternals presents a 21st century mythology, and through its adaptation of Western narratives and storytelling choices, urges the audience to see its worth through a utopian lens. Here, "utopia" will be considered both to mean a perfect, ideal place and also one that is inherently impossible, as no reality can be truly perfect. In the utopia offered by *Eternals*, all facets of history, colonialism, and racism are present and reality is reconfigured as a global nation, replacing the disparate national polarization of today.

However, inviting the audience to see the story, characters, and source material offered here as a potential utopia is paradoxically problematic. How can the root of all civilization be Ancient Greece? How can the values inherent to Western one and mythology house the diversity needed to encompass the full breadth of human experience and beliefs? Thinking about the film as a utopia forces the audience to examine the issues of race, nationalism, and colonialism in historical, literary, and present-day contexts and ultimately to contrast today with the film's utopia.

For the purposes of this analysis, the audience is an uncomfortable blend of monolithic and diasporic. When box office takings are measured—the universal answer to “will there be a sequel?”—they are divided into two sections: domestic and international. While certain markets are more prominent within that second category, there is clearly a bias towards the input of American audiences. However, the nature of this film, as will be discussed, is such that particular care is taken to diversify the film and by extension its target audience.

It is important to note that prior to the 2021 film *Eternals*, the comic book form has already filtered through various literary, historical, and mythological texts to create these characters and the basic premises of various story arcs for them. This initial adaptation of classical sources offers a Western-centric narrative. The secondary adaptation taking place in *Eternals* serves as a postcolonial response to both the comic book decisions and the narratives on which they draw. Consequently, Marvel films such as this one need to be considered through the intermediary of their comic books. The *Eternals* characters first appeared in July 1976 ([DeFalco et al. 2019, p. 125](#)) and it is therefore vital to understand that decades of comic book source material were available when this film was conceptualized and plotted. The creative minds behind this film had far more source material than they could ever fit into one film, so it is particularly important to track what storylines they chose to tell with these characters as they must be interpreted as deliberate artistic, nuanced choices rather than as ones dictated by the source material.

The film focuses on ten eternal beings who have been a part of Earth’s history and cultural generation since the beginning of humanity. Their role is not to interfere with human events or experience such as war or technological advances, but rather to eradicate another alien species, the Deviants, from the planet. The issue of whether or not this vision of history is both Western and non-Western recurs in different ways throughout the film, challenging the Western canon’s relationship with nationalism and race. Although the film starts in the present day, flashbacks spaced throughout the film show the important roles these characters have played throughout history. Through these flashbacks, the audience is sped through human history from 5000 BCE with the arrival of the Eternals—who are sent by the even more powerful Arishem, who is a Celestial—to 1521 CE, when apparently the Deviants are eradicated from the planet. This particular date is key for seeing the characters and the film directly respond to Western colonialism. The year 1521 CE sees the Eternals eradicate the Deviants in the same time and place as the Spanish conquistadors are committing genocide against the indigenous people of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan. This moment in human history fractures the group: some want to prevent the genocide while some say they must stick to the parameters of their mission, which dictate that they have to stay out of human conflict unless Deviants are involved.

Although the group is not allowed to leave Earth until Arishem permits them to do so, they spend the next five hundred years disbanded, living, for the most part, individual lives at least in part because of this moral disagreement. Certainly, the fracturing of the group is also caused both by the seeming completion of their shared mission, but of all the moments in over 6500 years of human history that could have driven the group apart, the film chooses one of history’s worst moments of colonialism, nationalism, and racism on which to center the plot. The film then more or less smash-cuts to today, when not only are the Deviants actually not eradicated, but the moral, social, and political issues the Eternals debated in 1521 CE are still much in evidence.

Ultimately, Marvel's 2021 film *Eternals* presents a new mythology, still constructed from a Western-centric canon, but enacted as a utopian, multicultural pantheon.

2. *Eternals* and Western Mythology

There is a vocal contingent of scholars arguing that it is time to “build critical momentum” in order to reach broader consensus regarding “the cultural significance of comics as an aesthetically complex, historically rich, and substantially American medium” ([Stein et al. 2011, p. 502](#)). Some specifically focus on the ways in which stigma surrounding this medium has “significantly impeded the evolution of the comic book as an art form” ([Lopes 2006, p. 387](#)). Both of these perspectives influence this discussion of *Eternals*. The ability this art form possesses, particularly in its adapted film form, to speak to today's issues of nationalism, racial polarization, and the postcolonial impact of both of these points is unique. The ubiquity of this form of popular culture in this particular moment enables it to function as a new mythology, much as Barthes famously codified in his work on this subject in the 20th century. These arguments can go one step further: comics are now part of both political messaging and widespread myth-making.

Barthes's assertion that “myth is a language” ([Barthes 2013, p. xi](#)), and the ways in which the nuances of his argument connect to superheroes, are key for this analysis. When Barthes discusses myth as a language, he is thinking in terms of cultural mythologies, or rather in the ways in which clichés and culture collide. For him, myths are the stories humans tell ourselves and one another, more factually than narratively and more focused on identity than plot. In one particular example, Barthes discusses wrestling as a spectacle rather than as a sport ([Barthes 2013, pp. 3–5](#)). The movements are choreographed, designed for the spectators' enjoyment rather than the exertion of physical superiority over an opponent. Indeed, as Barthes points out, the audience of such matches does not care if the fight is fixed or choreographed. That is not their expectation, nor does Barthes think it should be as he delves further into the roles assigned by the performative world of professional wrestling. Andrew R. Bahlmann also considers Barthes, particularly his discussion of wrestling. Specifically, Bahlmann connects this commentary on the prescribed roles in wrestling to comic book superheroes, such as The Hulk ([Bahlmann 2016, p. 11](#)). The world of wrestling Barthes discusses, both in terms of its performative aspects and the clear-cut roles assigned to various characters, maps quite nicely, as Bahlmann comments, onto the world of superheroes. As will be demonstrated by my close reading of the characters in *Eternals*, there are particularly valuable insights to be gained by this connection.

Another scholar who considers Barthes's work significant in ways for this assessment of *Eternals* is Rebecca Houze. Houze references Barthes in that she offers “one of how it was read the images that surround us...the ideas they signify” and the ways in which they are “located in graphic signage, in corporate identity systems, and, sometimes, in objects” ([Houze 2016, p. 3](#)). She takes the way in which Barthes considers myth to be a type of speech and offers a new way to see symbols and signs as new mythologies. In particular, she looks at the analysis Barthes famously offers on *Paris Match*, which he “demonstrated that the image on one level signified the soldier's patriotism, but on another reassured its white bourgeois audience of the validity of French colonialism in Africa, at a time of increasing political unrest” ([Houze 2016, p. 2](#)). This point of reference is useful in this analysis of *Eternals*

as a new mythology, in that it simultaneously offers a rendition of Western canon and a postcolonial response to it. While certain aspects of the film seemingly celebrate and uphold the tradition of Western monopoly on literary and historical exceptionalism, other aspects of the film clearly aim to refute that narrative.

Another way in which Barthes's *Paris* can be considered is as a contemplation on the connection between mythology and empathy. The two levels on which the image can be regarded, movingly patriotic or approvingly colonialistic, speak to the ways in which perspective alters emotions. Arguably, it is the role of mythology to offer these different perspectives.

Lastly, Joseph Campbell considers the empathetic properties of myth from both a pedagogical and a sociological perspective. The purpose of myth, whether old or new, is to, as Campbell argues, provide a frame of reference through storytelling. These forms of repeated traditional one take up residence collectively in the zeitgeist of a society. Consequently, "when the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in your own life. It gives you perspective on what's happening to you" ([Campbell 1991, p. 2](#)). He asserts that "one of the problems today is that it are not well acquainted with the spirit" ([Campbell 1991, p. 1](#)). Although Campbell was writing 30 years ago about what he saw as a crisis in education: that Greek, Latin, and biblical one used to be part of everyone's vocabulary, but that these fields are no longer ubiquitous, his argument is even more true today. The vernacular of popular culture in the 21st century has shifted; arguably, the cultural ubiquity of comic book superhero films makes them one of the strongest candidates to serve as new cultural touchstones.

When Campbell discusses myth's relationship to culture, he argues that these stories, "these bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don't know what the guide-signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself" ([Campbell 1991, p. 2](#)). Campbell's view of myth here lines up extremely well with the way in which *Eternals* functions as a modern mythology. Although the film is hardly ancient, the perspectives it offers of humanity, history, and morality are rooted in far older lessons and stories. The adaptation of the comic books, which is an adaptation of so much older one, mythology, and history, shows just how much persists in society's efforts to describe, define, and seek a utopian ideal.

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