

# WHAT IT MEANS

Myth, Symbol, and Archetype in the  
Third Millennium, Vol. 1

EXCERPTS

Eva Rome

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also by Eva Rome

*Travel for STOICs: Empowering the Solo Traveler Who  
Is Obsessive, Introverted, and Compulsive*

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## INTRODUCTION

**W***hat It Means (WHIM)* is a collection of essays that examines how myth, symbol, and archetype manifest in everyday American life in the early third millennium. *WHIM* was written for readers interested in cultural studies, mythology, language, human behavior, philosophy, and anthropology, and is also intended to be a text for future readers curious about life back in the CE 2000s. *What It Means* is a time capsule in written form, and for those who enjoy burying objects for future discovery, instructions for preserving it appear at the end of the introduction.

From generation to generation, the world's myths, symbols, and archetypes express their timeless qualities in compelling and uniquely contemporary ways, and *What It Means* interprets and illuminates this phenomenon. *WHIM* emerged from three sources: a dream my friend of fifty-plus

years, Susan Matthews, had in 2015, in which her kitchen appliances were covered with a pattern of photo-real peanut butter and jelly sandwiches set in shiny Formica; a story I wrote about a fictional trip to La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles as a twelve-year-old; and the mid-twentieth century French literary theorists engaged in the study of semiology (the uses and interpretations of signs and symbols) and hermeneutics (the study of written, verbal, and nonverbal communication)...

(Roland) Barthes famously analyzed popular post-World War II consumer and entertainment culture, and *What It Means* aspires to be the early third millennium's answer to his insightful and funny work *Mythologies*. Published in 1957, *Mythologies* is a collection of essays that examines the bourgeois norm, as he puts it, and the appropriation-cum-transformation of myth to express modern meanings. *Mythologies* includes essays on "The Romans in Films" (why do Romans always have fringe bangs and sweaty bodies?), "Soap Powders and Detergents" (substances that vanquish evil and dirt and maintain the public order), and "Operation Margarine" (by examining the margarine versus butter dispute, Barthes illuminates the ways in which the establishment rids us of our prejudices). With Barthes as inspiration, *WHIM* is a survey of today's bourgeois norm in a collection of twenty-one short essays.

From the semiological point of view, Barthes approaches his subjects as studies of ideas manifest in form.

The development of publicity, of a national press, of radio, of illustrated news, not to speak of the survival of a myriad rites of communication which rule social appearances makes the development of a semiological science more urgent than ever. In a single day, how many really non-signifying fields do we cross? Very few, sometimes none. Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, signals, signboards, clothes, suntan even, which are so many messages to me.<sup>1</sup>

Had Barthes lived to see the flourishing of television and the emergence of the internet, Instagram, Twitter, selfies, 3-D printing, virtual reality, and on and on, he would be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material for his studies. Questing for those naturalized expressions of myth in popular culture, he'd never have to leave his desk...

At its most basic, *What It Means* is my interpretation of myths, symbols, and archetypes that have meaning for today and hopefully for *What It Means's* readers. Decoding the strangeness of our contemporary world can be challenging, and *WHIM* provides (at least a few of) the answers to our sometimes-confusing, sometimes-chaotic existence. It is



hoped that readers from the end of the twenty-first century and beyond will look back on *What It Means* to gain insights into, what will likely seem to them, the peculiarities of an earlier time.

## Car Wash as Purification Ritual

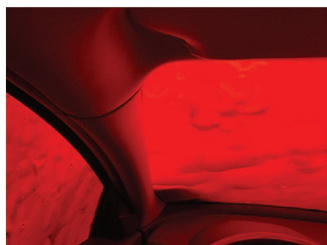
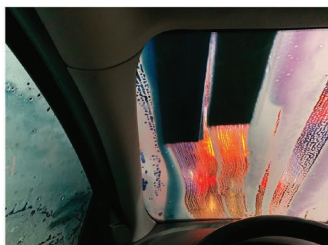
Contemporary purification rituals, where water is the purifying medium, abound in the third millennium, just as they did thousands of years ago. We have the Jewish mikveh, a complete immersion in water to restore the observant to a state of virtue and piety; the Islamic ablution ritual of Wudu, where the hands, feet, head, mouth, and nostrils are washed in preparation for prayer or for handling the Quran; the Christian baptism tradition, and secular rituals including immersion in freezing water in winter, spring break at the beach, and hot tub parties. But nothing rivals the automated car wash purification ritual in efficacy, in systematized removal of dirt and filth, and in outcome. As the driver of the car, we experience the ritual minus the physical and emotional discomforts that can ac-

company a traditional purification ritual, and we reap the benefits sans the threat of annihilation. Enwombed in the safety of the cab of the car, we witness the utter transformation of our vehicle from unclean to clean within a matter of moments and experience this cleansing by proxy.

As in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a Virgil-surrogate guides us onto the eternally rolling track where, once our tires are locked, there is no escape and no turning back. Suggesting the rite of baptism, car wash nozzles spray a fine mist that covers our vehicle, replicating the sound of a gentle summer rain. Next, an opaque, fluffy stratum of multicolored soap silently blankets the car, surrounding it in a cloud layer that vaguely suggests a heavenly abode and that insulates the driver completely from her surrounds. Momentarily one feels free of gravity, an angel-spirit floating in a rainbow multiverse. The cares of the world have melted away, and absolution is within one's grasp. But just as abruptly, this comforting layer is whisked away and we are back in Dante's Inferno. From all directions, the car is subjected to a physical violence to its body in the form of whirling, rotating strips of thick red chamois—the flails of Lucifer—making horrifying slapping noises on all surfaces as if they wished to strip the car not only of its filth but also the outer painted surface and the metal skin itself. This is the supreme test of the driver's ability to maintain the serenity induced by the previous two stations, and it is advisable to engage in a short

penitential prayer or contemplate a future act of contrition at this point in the purification ceremony.

Although the lowest circle of hell has been reached, the faint light of Purgatorio—the second kingdom “wherein the human spirit doth purge itself”<sup>1</sup>—can be glimpsed in the distance. But first one must pass through a curtain of the purest water, which in some car washes is lit by a cycling color sequence created by high-intensity LEDs, not only suggestive of the tortures of the nine circles of hell now left behind, but also a symbol of the rainbow, God’s covenant that “the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the illuminated curtain of water can be understood as a symbol of the synthesis of heaven and Earth. Emerging from this station, one passes beneath the winds of Aeolus, and most, but not all, vestiges of grime and water are swept away. The shades of the upper circle of hell, consigned to an eternity of wiping and buffing, conclude the purification ceremony with a quick rub-down of the entire vehicle and wave you on your way. Paradiso is, by now, clearly on the horizon.



## 3-D Archery

**S**o-called 3-D archery is a popular sport among hunters wishing to hone their skills in preparation for the dispatching of live animals. The 3-D archery course is strewn with life-sized, self-healing foam models of common game animals, such as deer, elk, boar, and rabbits. Adding an element of fantasy to the game hunter's experience, other not-so-common targets include velociraptors, cobras, carp, alligators, baboons, jackalopes, and even zombies. During the first two decades of the third millennium, 3-D archery courses have proliferated worldwide.

Hunting myths abound in every culture, and when contemporary man participates in 3-D archery, he connects to a tradition that is ageless, feral, the essence of traditionally masculine identity, and that stimulates the most profound depths of the primitive human brain. But there is also a mystery associated with archery that suggests the ineffable.

Ask an archer why he hunts 3-D foam animals, and he will answer, “Because they can’t run away.”

Even in today’s secular societies, hunting is a sacred act that continues a long and venerated tradition having ancient origins and, as such, must be consecrated. As the bread and wine of Catholicism correlates to the body and blood of Christ, the self-healing foam 3-D practice animal becomes the animal itself, but not before it is sanctified by the high priest of the 3-D archery community. And who is this individual? In any group of archers, it is the shaman-like man who can grow the densest beard fastest, who most resembles a big game animal himself, and who drives the biggest pickup truck with the most deeply grooved, off-road-friendly tires. He can tolerate the greatest quantity of ritually ingested psychoactive agents, such as Budweiser, and his archery skills are enhanced when in the throes of hopps-induced perception anomalies. This man decorates his hunting bow with all manner of ornamentation, including special stabilizer weights, peep sights, vibration reduction dampers, and string silencers, and he proudly decorates his basement “man cave” with the skulls and carcasses of the animals he has killed, much like the ancient artists of Lascaux painted their cave walls with images of vanquished animals. The high priest archery shaman consecrates the practice animals by emulating the blessing ritual of the Catholic priest (also referencing the Hindu *pūja* ceremony, where statues of gods and goddesses are bathed in milk and honey by Brahmin

priests), but instead of holy water, the shaman sacrifices a can of Budweiser, popularly known as the King of Beers, and pours its contents over the inanimate creature, thus symbolically enlivening it and accessing its spiritual essence. As the Budweiser jingle tells us, “Where there’s life, there’s Bud,” and conversely, then, “where there’s Bud, there’s life.”

A full moon in October is known as the hunter’s moon or blood moon because it was then that Native Americans hunted deer by the autumn moonlight, amassing food and animal skins for the cold winter ahead. In ancient Greece, one might have prevailed on certain gods and goddesses to assure a successful hunt and a comfortable winter, and Apollo—god of music, archery, healing, sun, light, and knowledge—was one of those gods. However, the most famous archer of mythology isn’t a masculine god at all; it’s Artemis, Apollo’s twin sister, goddess of the hunt, the moon, forests and hills, and also of archery; mistress of animals. Artemis may be most famous, though, for her determination to maintain her virginity, and myths abound regarding the many thwarted attempts to relieve her of her “burden.” First there was Actaeon, the great hunter whom Artemis turned into a stag for the transgression of attempting intercourse, excited by seeing her bathing naked in her sacred spring. Not recognizing their master in his stag form, his own dogs set upon him, tearing him to bits. Then there’s





1.



2.

3.



4.

1. 3-D archery hunter and boar target.
  2. Giuseppe Cesari, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1603.
  3. 3-D archery hunters and zombie target.
  4. 3-D archery hunters and mastodon mother and baby target.
- note: 2-D archery targets used to protect identity.*

Adonis, who boasted that he was a better hunter than Artemis, losing his life when a wild boar was sent by Artemis to contest the claim. In the interest of protecting his sister's maidenhood, Apollo tricked Artemis into killing Orion, Artemis's hunting companion and romantic interest. Given the dangers male gods faced at the hands of Artemis, these myths may, at some primal level, inform the reluctance of today's male 3-D archer to include women in this activity. An interesting question arises when one considers that Artemis was the mistress of animals: Is the act of 3-D archery, and the dispatching of flesh-and-blood animals that this practice leads to, the killing of the goddess herself?

# The Eyebrow as Female Power Symbol

**W**ith the invention of the motion picture camera, c. 1893, and its swift rise to prominence as an entertainment medium came the rethinking of the face as symbol and the role of the eyebrow as signifier. In this pre-Botox era, the eyebrows were an important conveyor of meaning and emotion. For stage actors, who were often lit unflatteringly from underneath, sometimes forming frightening shadows on the face, certain expressions relied heavily on the eyebrows when other features were flattened by this harsh lighting. Actors talked as much with their eyebrows as they did with their voices.

Actors in early films quickly realized that the stage makeup they were accustomed to wearing did not translate well to cinema. Early black-and-white films were ortho-

chromatic, with sensitivity to all visible light except red, resulting in red lips looking black, skin looking gray and ghastly, and light blue eyes disappearing altogether. Eyebrows were heavily painted to compensate for this distortion of the other features: thick and dark for men; pencil-thin and arching for women. Think Charlie Chaplin and Groucho Marx; Theda Bara and Greta Garbo.

As film stocks improved over the decades and panchromatic black-and-white film replaced orthochromatic film, actors discovered they could be more subtle with their makeup. By the late 1920s, the thin, arched eyebrow was the established film look du jour, and women of that era sometimes shaved their eyebrows—then painted them back in—to exercise complete control over the shape, size, color, and arch of the brow. Since the arch is a symbol of the ability to support and carry an enormous amount of weight (the arch protects from collapse and disintegration), controlling the eyebrow was synonymous to controlling both the arch and the arc of one's life. Along with the Cupid's bow-shaped mouth, Cupid's bow-shaped eyebrows—curved up ever so slightly at the corners—created overt associations with the chubby prankster whose arrows fill the stricken with uncontrollable desire. Exaggerated and accentuated eyebrows on a woman's face signaled a desire to wed (or bed), unfortunately also communicating a modicum of desperation; and to stand under an arch, which symbolizes a future home, is to imagine one's own wedding. Clearly, the female eyebrow

advertised sexual availability with the intent of attracting a mate, and the eyebrow has continued in its important role as communicator of desire and mystery.

Enter the eyebrow of the third millennium: a power statement of utmost potency. Women sport beautifully contoured, swept-back eyebrows mimicking the horns of an African impala buck or the graceful wings of a dove in flight, both statements of independence and strength. These eyebrows exceed the size of the normal eyebrow by some one-and-a-half times and wrap around the temples, like two slender fingers holding aloft a priceless Ming dynasty bowl. An homage to the Cupid's bow look of the '20s and '30s is still discernible, but the bow is flattened, more curved at the tips, and much fuller. These eyebrows are a signifier of the Greek goddess Artemis—huntress with bow and quiver—the goddess associated with fecundity; and the more prominent the eyebrow, the more the wearer signals her fertility. Large, voluptuous eyebrows are so sought after that some women with a dearth of eyebrow hair resort to a procedure known as microblading, where small diagonal cuts are made into the skin beneath the brows; these small cuts are then filled with a pigment and allowed to heal.

What about the unibrow? In the third millennium, the unibrow is the *ultimate* female power symbol. The unibrow is the utter collapse of the arch; it signifies a woman alone by choice, self-sufficient, seeking no one's companionship but her own. To pluck the hairs overlaying the procerus muscle

(the muscle in which frown lines appear), thus breaching unity and creating two out of one, is a symbol of resignation, futility, hopelessness, and loss of power.

In fourth millennium BCE Mesopotamia, in the region known as the Fertile Crescent, the Sumerians developed their system of written communication called cuneiform. Using a wedge-shaped stylus (the Latin word *cuneus* means “wedge”), these early authors created lines of pictographs by pressing the stylus into soft clay. Proto-cuneiform’s wedge-shaped style of writing drew its inspiration, interestingly, from the eyebrow, that most expressive of human features, and was in use for over three millennia, replaced in the second century CE with alphabetic writing. The connection to the eyebrow was thus lost, but the eyebrow’s innate, symbolic power endures in the third millennium and beyond.



## Peanut Butter and Jelly

**P**eanuts, a legume, develop their pods underground, and were first discovered and cultivated by the ancient Sumerians. Because of their scrotum-like structure and texture, and the fact that they usually contain two seeds, one per pod, they became a fertility symbol and were worshipped as such. A man who ate a handful of peanuts every day was assured of his virility well into old age. Another meaning assigned to the peanut came later and is associated with the Greek cult of Demeter. When Demeter's daughter, Persephone, was abducted by Hades and taken to his underground lair, Persephone was so terrified that she could not control her bowels. Peanuts were thought to be congealed bubbles of decomposing methane gas from Persephone's "night soil."

Toward the end of the second millennium, peanut butter, a creamy paste made of peanuts and hydrogenated oil,





Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The adolescent Bacchus*, 1598.  
Peanut butter and jelly sandwich added by the author.

was invented. When introduced into the mouth, peanut butter sticks to the palate, and the action of the tongue rubbing against the palate to remove the peanut butter stimulates the release of feel-good hormones dopamine and serotonin. Hence, peanut butter grew to be one of the world's most popular foods. In the third millennium, the act of pouring a bag of peanuts into a carbonated beverage, followed by the

ritual consumption of this potion, symbolizes the consummation of the sex act and its assured success.

Jelly, a rendered form of (most often) the grape, is of course connected with Dionysus, the god of wine, debauchery, and fertility (and later a patron of the arts). Grape jelly is thus a symbol of his generative essence. A potent and intoxicating combination, peanut butter and jelly is a food consumed to assure fecundity, to honor the gods, and to participate by proxy in an ancient Greek bacchanal.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The semiological meanings of objects, events, art, advertising, film/TV, and culture have been a life-long interest of Laurie McDonald (writing as Eva Rome). Her 1979 film *The World's Largest: A Tape About Texas* is a survey of larger-than-life-size monuments—including a giant jackrabbit, peanut, and twin beer cans—built in small Texas towns post World War II. In 1980, she produced a film about the Sweetwater, Texas, Rattlesnake Roundup that was a finalist in the U.S. Film and Video Festival, the precursor to Sundance. Her film *Private Parts* investigates the fine line between art and pornography and the dangers of confusing the two. *Good Fortune Face* takes place during the 1997 reunification of Hong Kong and mainland China, and a face-reading fortune teller interprets Hong Kong's future in the lines,

scars, moles, and discolorations on its new leader's face. *Prime Time* is montage of TV violence with images juxtaposed to create humorous effects and absurd situations. Laurie has received a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artist Fellowship and four American Film Institute/NEA Fellowships, and her video art has been exhibited internationally at museums, galleries, festivals, and in academia.

In his book *When Do Fish Sleep?*, author Dave Feldman bestowed The Margaret Mead Field Research Award on Laurie for her work collecting and writing about single, discarded shoes found on America's highways. In 2018, Laurie published the novel *Travel for STOICs: Empowering the Solo Traveler Who Is Obsessive, Introverted, and Compulsive*, a guide for successful travel with help from the ancient Stoics.

Laurie holds a masters degree in literature from the University of Houston and is a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. To learn more about her work, visit:

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