Focus on: American Mythology

What Is the American Myth Really Like?
The Myth of Equality and Quasi-constitutional Status of Declaration of Independence
Waking Up From a Dream: the American Myth of Social Mobility
Coming Out and Beyond: Polish and American Representations of Sexual Minorities
Polish Immigrant Women’s Encounter with the New World
Myths Pertaining to Polish Americans in the Press of Communist Poland
The Last Best West: A Canadian Myth of Success
Mythical Canada in Polish Minds – the Image of Canada in Polish Literature
Comic Books as the Modern American Mythology
Harley-Davidson on Polish Roads: the Mythical Aspects of Automotive Fascination
Some Myths About the Jury System from the Perspective of American Cinematography
The U.S. Marine as a Symbol of Soldier and a Part of the American Myth
Cold War Propaganda, US Prestige and the Eisenhower Administration: Implications from a Case Study Approach
Some Reflections on the Guevara Myth

Księgarnia Akademicka
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Introduction

Can everything, then, be a myth?
Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestion.
(Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*)

This special, anniversary volume of *Ad Americam* is different from the previous volumes, which included texts from various areas of American Studies and were not focused on any particular topic or subject. However, at the same time it somehow corresponds with the first issues in which the editorial concept assumed a selection of articles joined by some overriding idea or problem. For many reasons, the idea was abandoned, but it has now been resumed with this special issue.

The idea of an American Studies journal appeared 15 years ago from the desire to know America better, to confront our ideas with the ideas of others, and a willingness to exchange thoughts and thus explore new aspects of American culture, politics, history and present reality. Thanks to the texts we have published, we have come closer to America (*Ad Americam*), a distant, huge and very complex country with a multi-ethnic society and complicated history. As researchers of America in a distant country, “outsiders,” we hoped to present our different and unique perspective and to turn the attention of our readers to what cannot be seen from inside, from the center of America. We wanted to go beyond the cliche views and strategies that define and interpret America, in order to know but not succumb to the American myths. This is why the anniversary issue of *Ad Americam* is focused on a subject that allows us to understand America better, while at the same time distorting its image – American myths.

Professor Ira Chernus claims that American culture, politics, and history are full of myths which enter into various relationships with each other:

Small-scale myth is part of one or (more often) several larger-scale myths, which are in turn parts of ever larger myths, creating an interlocking web of hierarchies. For example, the Mayflower’s landing (and the Rock itself) are part of the Pilgrim myth, which is in turn part of the Puritan myth, which becomes part of a series of larger-scale myths: religious freedom, New England, the self-sufficient farmer, group heroism, conflict with the native peoples; democracy, the frontier, the Kingdom of God on earth, etc. (*The Two Great*)

This “interlocking web of hierarchies” creates American mythology. In other words, myths do not exist separately, and a mythology is not merely a simple set of
myths, but the relationships between myths are complex. In the published essays, American and Canadian myths are analyzed from two perspectives. The first is an attempt to look at a myth and its importance from an American or Canadian perspective, showing the role that myth plays in these societies. The second perspective is the Polish perspective, examining and interpreting American myths from the position of Polish culture participants.

As soon as America appeared on maps in the late 15th century, it captured the imagination of Europeans. Most of them built up a picture of a newly discovered continent on the basis of scanty reports by the first travelers. As time passed, there were more and more sources of information about America: personal letters, oral transmissions, and, finally, mass media messages: newspapers, photography, film, television and the Internet. Even today in the 21st century, in a shrinking world where the journey across the ocean takes only 8 hours, most Poles have not visited the United States or Canada, and they create an image of these countries mainly on the basis of mass media texts: news, films, TV shows, etc.; nowadays the media is responsible for generating new myths and preserving old ones. In Poland, American myths were always very popular and powerful.

The USA has always been attractive as a place where a person is able to escape from poverty at his/her own initiative or develop freely his/her abilities and talents. This has made America so appealing not only for many people from developing countries, but for anybody who has believed they could make better careers when they cross the Atlantic. Since Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries remained an underdeveloped country, the majority of Polish people always considered the United States as economically attractive. The migration from Poland to the USA was motivated by the same economic factors as in the cases of other poor countries, such as Italy and Ireland. Thus, the USA appeared for Polish people as a country of freedom and wealth. This common belief that the American model of development and “way of life” guaranteed prosperity and freedom for everyone was only strengthened in the communist period. It happened in spite of communist propaganda which tried to present the United States as a country of social inequalities and oppression.

In the communist era, the mythical image of America was confronted with our grim reality. Contestation and rebellion against communism had roots in ideas of a better, free world. These values were identified in Polish people’s minds with the United States. For Poles, no other country in the Western world embodied freedom and prosperity as totally as the United States. Not surprisingly, some American myths played an equally important role after 1989, allowing Poles to draw patterns and inspiration for building a new Poland. It is worth remembering here the words of the US ambassador to Poland, John Davis, who wrote in a telegram to the Department of State a few days before President Bush’s visit to Poland: “Landing in Warsaw, the President finds himself in the center of the world’s most pro-American country. Poles have always shared our love of individual freedom.” One should not forget that the myths which have been so alive in Poland have also defined the US’s depiction in other countries.

What is a myth, then? Can it be extracted in a pure form from the net of mythological entanglements, seeing that the individual texts in this volume are devoted to various, sometimes very small components of huge and complex American mythological narratives? There are many definitions of myth and many strategies to explain it.