

MELUSINE AS EMBLEM OF TRUTH

Philosophical tentacles, themes and approaches explored in the
audiovisual essay *The Mystery of Melusine*

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces the philosophical underpinnings, themes and approaches explored in the audiovisual essay *The Mystery of Melusine* (2021) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOvqyxVqqbA>>. Its footage consists of a dramatic performance in which I am enacting the contents of a philosophical poem authored by myself as the titular character. The narrative of the film essay explores the nature of truth and espouses an ontology of magic through a re-interpretation of the myth of Melusine. In European folklore, Melusine is the reclusive and mysterious wife who agrees to marry upon the condition that she is granted her privacy every Saturday. On Saturdays, she spends her solitude secretly bathing her fish tail until one day her husband peeps through the keyhole of her bathing chamber. She learns he has broken his promise to not impede her privacy, and so she evanesces. In my film essay, Melusine is a metaphor for the secretiveness and elusiveness of truth, and the way life unfurls itself in secretive and clandestine ways. The notion of truth as elusive and secretive derives its inspiration from the philosopher Martin Heidegger, and this film essay can be considered a mythic interpretation of some of his ideas. In addition to a mythic interpretation of truth, the film essay provides a narrative for the way life meets itself through otherness and recounts the journey of personal transformation in which the querent must reconcile to truth; this is elaborated as a process of self-seeing and self-recognition that takes place through the alien other.

KEYWORDS: Melusine, truth, Heidegger, magic

A Hydrous Drama

The experimental film *The Mystery of Melusine* was recorded in August 2020 at Aylen Lake, Ontario, Canada and edited in December 2020. Footage of myself wearing a full-length metallic azure dress adorned with scales, scales draping my arms, a blue veil and headdress, redolent of a blue bride undergoing the procession of matrimony, performing various symbolic actions that coordinate with the spoken lines of a poem in the backdrop of a lake was later edited to create the visual effect of a winged mermaid with tentacles protruding from her back, producing the dream-like imagery of an aquatic meditation on the nature of truth and the journey of consciousness.

Melusine as Ontological Truth Principle

In *The Mystery of Melusine*, Melusine is described as the creatrix of the universe and is conceived of as ontological truth principle. The journey that she undergoes is the process of her self-recognition and self-understanding. The narration recounts that she is elusive and evasive, that she emits a fog that is “veritable illusion,” and her song is described as “enchantment,” the speaking of the divine word. Her song ushers what is beautiful into existence. She is creative, even creating herself. Yet also destructive: she wields a sword and scythe, using a turtle shell and a mirror as shields, her beauty equated with war. The inspiration for understanding truth as something creative, elusive, and combative stems from Heidegger.

For Heidegger, truth is mysterious, evasive, and elusive, in contradistinction to the scientific materialist account that espouses that truth can be objectified, measured, quantified, and calculated (1977a: 127; 1992: 54). For Heidegger, truth evades capture, measurement. Truth evanesces when attempts are made to capture it; it slips out of reach. Heidegger does not conceive of truth in terms of the dichotomy of true and false (ibid: 67). Rather, he conceives that truth and falsity comprise movements of truth, (Heidegger, 1977b: 180) that truth is forged through strife (ibid: 174) and upheld by paradox. The notion of truth as combative, as comprising strife and war also inspired Nietzsche (1979: 47) and finds its source in the presocratic philosopher Heraclitus (*The First Philosophers*, 2000: 40).

Truth in Heidegger’s lexicon refers to the ancient Greek concept of *aletheia*, meaning unconcealment. Unconcealment is revelation in which truth unveils itself. Yet in order for truth to reveal itself, first it had to veil or conceal itself. Truth is conceived by Heidegger as this double-motion of revelation and obfuscation, every revelation simultaneously concealing other aspects, subterfuge accompanying every revelation (1977b: 176-180). Truth reveals itself to one to the degree that one is open to receiving it. Heidegger laments that the way in which moderns have objectified truth, we are no longer open to receiving it in the same the ancients were privy to (1992: 103); only the poet’s heart is endowed with the necessarily sensitivity to meet with truth in a profound sense. (Heidegger, 1971: 131) Poetry is really the song of the heart that calls forth into existence, invoking a revelation (ibid: 137, 139); Heidegger tells us that all life is music, existence itself comprises a song (ibid: 135). Heidegger points to the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides as having directly apprehended truth in a way that moderns are oblivious to. In a didactic poem, Parmenides recounts a chariot ride through the aethers and encountering Truth as a Goddess figure. Heidegger comments that truth certainly is a Goddess, though we moderns have no sense of this, we have no idea what truth is anymore (1992: 162).

Melusine as Emblem of Truth

Drawing on Heidegger and Parmenides, *The Mystery of Melusine* invokes the notion of truth as a mythic feminine personage. As a folkloric figure, Melusine is not generally conceived of as a Goddess, but rather as a reclusive mermaid figure. In my view, Melusine as a mermaid is an apposite emblem for truth in an age in which we have lost sight of truth; she is denied truth status in a culture that objectifies truth. Conceived of as absurd, as whimsical, as nonsensical, childish—yet these recesses of meaning are spaces where truth hides some of its deepest secrets. Melusine as a mythic mermaid personage indicates toward this deeper understanding of truth that cannot be captured by the apparatuses of scientific materialism.

Sight, Vision and Mirrors

Heidegger imparts that we moderns cannot see or think clearly, our perception is blunted, confused, deadened. Yet if one could see and think in resonance with life, one would meet the gaze of truth, and this is the inner vision that the poet's heart is privy to. Truth sees and truth looks (ibid: 159, 162). To meet the gaze of truth is a self-meeting in the sense that the creative principle of truth meets itself through human eyes. The notion of truth that sees and looks finds expression in *The Mystery of Melusine* through its use of mirrors. The mirror is an emblem of Venus and is associated with mermaids. But the symbolism deployed in the film essay indicates that the mirror is not just an instrument of vanity but is also a tool of self-recognition and creation. The mirror can be a portal to another world. In the met gaze of two mirrors, infinity incises its signature in an infinite regress of duplicating images; the meeting of mirrors opens a space for dimensionality, evincing the paradox of truth meeting its own gaze that is maintained through strife. The hermetic axiom, "as above, so below" bespeaks the existence of esoteric dimensions that can be accessed through a "mirror of visions," (Levi, 2017: 35).

The Alien Other Encounters Herself

Melusine encounters herself through the other with the sudden appearance of the alien: she finds a mysterious sculpture of an aquatic humanoid draped on a rock in her lake. In this way, the unknown other comes to her to remind her of herself. It is not just an object; it is revealed as infused with life, as living, animated, vivified. She does not recognise herself in the other at first.

Aquatic Time

Time is a prominent theme in *The Mystery of Melusine*, evinced through floating clocks. There is a scene where Melusine is holding an ankh, and she picks up a floating clock, passing her by on the water. She examines it, and then releases it back into the coursing waves, holding steadfast to her ankh. Clock-fish swim by her, moving toward the horizon, and in the sky above her, clock-butterflies fly past. The symbolism imparts that the kind of time that Melusine as truth principle makes reference to exists beyond objectified perception, beyond the parameters of what clocks can measure; the scene evokes the notion that primordial truth occupies its own time, makes reference to a dimension of time which is eternal. The notion of primordial truth as occupying a dimension of time beyond objectified perception can be located in Heidegger. (1992: 149; 1972: 17-19).

Magic as Expression of Truth

The Mystery of Melusine espouses an ontology of magic. The film opens with a quotation from Martin Heidegger expounding the notion of beauty as the "shining of the true." This is actually my paraphrased wording or interpretation; the quotation whence this notion derives reads: "This shining, joined in the work, is the beautiful. Beauty is one way in which truth essentially occurs as unconcealment," (Heidegger 1977b: 181).

As *The Mystery of Melusine* culminates, the "shining of the true" is referred to as veritable magic. The film essay propounds that magic is the revelation of beauty; beauty defined as the way life reveals itself to us on its own terms, its play of veiling and unveiling. I use the term 'magic' here in reference to its esoteric sense, as pertaining to lineages of thinking and

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discourses concerning invisible worlds, forces and powers. While many amulets, talismans, sigils and spells have been cast with the hopes of an intended effect, the film essay argues that veritable magic does not concern the fulfillment of one's desires and wishes. Life cannot be coerced, is not subject to control; magic as I have defined it is thus an ethical practice, a way of relating to life, of making oneself open to its revelations and intimations. The revelation and self-perception of truth is conceived as a magical act in which what was previously invisible finds expression.

The Journey of Self-Return to Self

The narrative recounts that Melusine sees herself directly but is blinded from such a direct self-confrontation, and she creates the physical world as a "maze-map" that enables her path of self-return. This message that can be gleaned is that for this reason, there are clues, hints encrypted within all things that return us to truth when we wander astray. Yet the maze-map she creates which leads her back to herself can also be interpreted as the landscape of the unconscious.

Traversing the Maze of the Unconscious

In an article for *Shima* that I authored entitled 'Melusine Machine,' (2018) deploying Jungian and Deleuzian theoretical frameworks, I evinced the mermaid as an emblem of self-overcoming and psychic integration, who traverses the maze of the personal unconscious to attain ingress to the realm of the collective unconscious; I also elucidated the Jungian interpretations of water and Melusine. To very briefly touch on some of the points of that article, for Jung, water, and Melusine are symbols endowed with alchemical connotations of coming-to-consciousness. Jung conceives of water as symbol of the unconscious, and Melusine is conceived of by Jung a personage who lives within the "blood" of the human. The article 'Melusine Machine' and film *The Mystery of Melusine* are intertwined and inseparable. Yet the article preceded the writing of *The Mystery of Melusine*; in effect, the creative surge of poetic inspiration provided the impetus for what would later become the subject for a deeper philosophical analysis.

Hermetic and Platonic Tendrils

The Mystery of Melusine evinces the alchemical journey of self-transformation, depicting the process of transmuting lead to gold, of overcoming the dark night of the soul, of blindness that finds redemption. Such a journey describes the process of entrainment with and merging with truth, or truth reconciling with itself. Merging with truth can be understood as the zenith of Platonic philosophical endeavor. Plato espouses the notion of attaining wisdom as an erotic act, that unites its querent with truth (Plato, 1997: 249e); through the divine marriage with truth, the querent attains to apotheosis and regains the wings of her soul (Uzdavinys, 2007: 54). There is a double meaning in Melusine's character arc which evinces a hermetic and gnostic understanding: it is a narrative that pertains not just to truth who loses herself, forgets herself, but to all of us who forget who we truly are, that we may reclaim our divine possibility. The notion of the creatrix of the world as female, as Sophia or wisdom, is a Gnostic idea.

Melusine as Solitary Creatrix who Takes Flight

The Mystery of Melusine plays on the folklore of Melusine in the scenes where Melusine is portrayed in a bathtub floating in space, her tentacles and fins writhing in the tub. The bathtub is the site of Melusine's clandestine solitude, the secretiveness of truth that withholds, conceals with every revelation. She is a figure of solitude, of sacred solitude; and yet, she encounters the other who is alien to her through her solitude. The notion of Melusine as a creatrix of a world can be located in the work of Gaston Bachelard, who interprets Melusine as the creatrix of her own world, the world of her solitary reveries, and who merges with that world (1969: 202). And pertinently for my film essay, Bachelard interprets Melusine as a figure who inhabits both the water and the air (ibid: 205, 206).

Blindness, Entrapment and Spiritual Perception

In 'The Mystery of Melusine,' Melusine attains her freedom by leaping from her "Babel tower perch" and sprouting wings: such a narrative forges an analogy between Melusine, who is secluded in her bathing quarters, and Rapunzel, who is locked in a tower by an evil witch. In *The Mystery of Melusine*, Melusine escapes from the entrapment of amnesia that is identified with confusion generated from the fall of the tower of Babel. The tower is a metaphor for what holds us captive; in the lexicon of Philip K. Dick, one might say that the tower is the black iron prison, the imprisonment of a false reality perceived as real (1991: 180). For Melusine, her false imprisonment is a "perch" or a site of leverage from which to take flight, providing the impetus for her self-reclamation. The way Melusine is depicted taking a sledgehammer to the tower of her entrapment is redolent of the biblical story of Samson, whose final act of strength induces the pillars that uphold the edifice that holds him captive to fall ('Judges' 13-16). There is another reference to Rapunzel and Samson in the theme of blindness that is restored to sight. In 'The Mystery of Melusine,' Melusine's sight is restored through the tears cried by the sun. In the folktale of Rapunzel, Rapunzel's tears restore the sight of her beloved (Brothers Grimm, 2011: 46); in the biblical account, Samson's eyes are gouged out by the Philistines, but he attains spiritual sight through his faith in God.

The Creative Power of Archetypes

As I feel I am inspired by her archetype, it felt appropriate for me to enact the character of Melusine for this dramatic work. We are all inhabited by archetypes, and we can be possessed by them. Archetypes filter how we view the world, and how we perceive ourselves. Working with archetypes endows one with access to forces and powers we may not otherwise be privy to. Melusine is an archetype who speaks through me and inspires me. In some sense, my dramatisation of Melusine is a ritual action, a self-presentation that unites an aspect of my inner archetypal life with a dramaturgical enactment.

Conclusion

To summarise and conclude my artist's note introducing the philosophical tentacles, themes and approaches at work in *The Mystery of Melusine: The Mystery of Melusine* is an experimental film essay that explores the nature of truth through a re-interpretation of the folkloric personage of Melusine. Melusine is re-imagined in my re-telling as an ontological principle, a creative principle of truth who eludes all attempts to capture her. Her secretiveness is the source of her mysteries, the way life reveals itself in clandestine

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disguises, a mystery that is never-ending. *The Mystery of Melusine* recounts the narrative of truth, of one who becomes alienated from herself, and then returns to herself; it evinces the alchemical journey of psychic integration through the imagery of mermaids, tentacles, mirrors, a tower and blindness. The dramaturgical enactment of this narrative is conceived of as a ritual action that reconciles truth to life for its author and dramatist, an effect that is intended to reverberate in its audience.

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