

KEEPING UP WITH THE GODS: DIVERGENCE AND REBRANDING IN NEIL GAIMAN'S AMERICAN GODS

CĂLIN D. DRAGOȘ *

ABSTRACT. In his 2001 novel *American Gods*, author Neil Gaiman builds a fascinating world, captivatingly postmodern in its imaginative irreverence, in which the sacred permeates and coexists with the profane, and deities imperceptibly interact with humans. But even beyond its diegesis rife with mysteries and deception centered on a battle of the gods, there is metatextually more than meets the eye. For Gaiman's gods and their relationships spin a story that—though lending itself well to multiple forays into the human experience at large—unmistakably draws in readers (and viewers) through its contemporarily pertinent lessons on social and cultural clashes and negotiations; on democratic and authoritarian power; and even on anthropological evolution.

KEY WORDS: *American Gods*, cultural divergence, horizontal rebranding, mythology, post-modernism, vertical rebranding

Introduction

American Gods. The novel's title already presents the keen-eyed reader with an instance of juxtaposition as problematic as it is revealing. On its jacket, the words normally appear styled in all capitals ("AMERICAN GODS") for maximum brand visibility and recognition, and perhaps also for its author and publishers alike to steer well clear of any potential legal complications ("Gods" might offend monotheists just as much as "gods" might offend neopagans, while in some excessively politically-correct circles anything "God" should be redacted to "G—d", etc.) But it is important to remember that such potential for paranoia is a hidden blessing found chiefly in democratic and ideologically diverse societies, just as America is supposed to be, where it is possible and even socially healthy to pluralize and deconstruct what would elsewhere constitute an unassailable normative monolith (as symbolized by the many possibilities behind "God" vs. "Gods")..

* CĂLIN D. DRAGOȘ (PhD in Intercultural Humanities, Jacobs University in Bremen, 2012) teaches British and American Cinema at Partium Christian University. E-mail: calin.d.lupitu@gmail.com.

Franchising the Gods: Sources vs. Actors

As such, Gaiman's conceptual scaffolding hinges on the United States of America as a worldwide cultural melting pot, on whose territory successive waves of immigrants from as far back as prehistory have settled and brought with them their cultural identity and heritage, including their respective myths, their forms of worship, and of course their deities. This much is shared between our world and theirs, but theirs seems to feature additional spiritual complexities. Namely, while gods and goddesses in Gaiman's world are depicted as "real" (*i.e.*, able to manifest and interact physically) in their diegetic context, they are simultaneously understood even there to be "not as real"—or rather not as fully sacred (to be read to the tune of Sheryl Crow's *What If God Was One of Us*)—as their namesakes that were/are seen as religious figures in our reality, but also theirs.

Otherwise put, a certain entity worshipped as part of a religion (in both worlds) would be present in their reality as little more than a remote and abstracted authority, a cosmic source rather than a cosmic actor, and a perfect untouchable Being only able to actively take part in reality via its relatively independent incarnations. In contrast, the gods manifested as concrete actors are part of the physical world, even though they have abilities that allow them to bend its rules to varying degrees. But, in principle, "If you move and act in the material world, then the material world acts on you. Pain hurts, just as greed intoxicates and lust burns" (Gaiman 2001: 159).

Such a relationship between Source and Actor has notable precedents in several major philosophical and religious systems, as it resembles that between the Ein Soph, The Cosmic Mind (also as The Nameless due to the human impossibility of fully knowing it, as per Singer et al., 1906), and its successive cosmogonic Emanations as described in the Kabbalah, while the Actors, the gods mingling with the humans, may well appear as Shadows of their respective Ideas (the Sources), to paraphrase Plato's conceptual understanding (quoted in Ruggiero 2002).

The best example for the elucidation of this labyrinthine concept is found with the multitude of Jesuses depicted in the TV adaptation (and only briefly mentioned in the book). There is a Black Jesus, a Mexican Jesus, a WASP Jesus, a Korean Jesus, and many others, gathered at Easter's place on Easter Sunday, so all of them may celebrate their holiday at once. Of course, their very number makes it impossible for any one of them to be the Jesus Christ (although the WASP one appears to be treated as the "master copy"). Thus, in the episode, risqué hilarity ensues when characters not expecting to see Jesus exclaim His name in shock and then quickly add they did not mean him, *i.e.*, the variant standing in front of them (and serenely blessing them, all the same).

While the above is not the only example in the same vein (e.g., there are also at least two Odins in their world), it is quite striking in terms of proving that the nature of the gods and the other mythological creatures interacting across the physical plane in *American Gods* is that of a copy compared to the (religious) originals. The many Jesuses are all slightly different along the lines of what in economic terms we might call localization, *i.e.*, they are geo-culturally adapted versions of the same original concept and/or of each other, essentially cultural franchises (of the concept but also, here, literally of the Source of Jesus) via the conceptual mechanism that rendered the omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence of the Sources as the arguably more diegetically realistic multiplicity of the Actors.

The skeptical reader might feel that such a conceptual mechanism is likely to have originated as a legal gimmick intended to protect the author from any real-world blasphemy lawsuits. But even had it been so, his distinction between the two categories of gods more importantly serves to upholster a highly significant plot device, which introduces the logical necessity of a dynamic relationship between humans and gods, often precarious and taking the form of a power struggle. This is because, just as there can be no localization without the specific need for it in the local context, the Source seems unable or perhaps unwilling to produce an Actor if there is no need for him/her expressed by the respective community. Plainly speaking, without people there would not be any gods.

Indeed, in Gaiman's fictional universe, the gods and goddesses (the Actors) of a culture are rather materializations and/or personifications of culture-specific archetypes and unite their respective society in what Carl G. Jung (1996) would recognize as their collective unconscious. They exist only because their cisdiegetic humans have created them and, crucially, continued to invest spiritual energy into them, in various ritual forms that span a continuum from blood sacrifices to time compulsively dedicated each day (as new goddess Media triumphantly points out). Beyond the little chicken-or-the-egg irony, this raises a particularly worrisome point for Gaiman's gods. "They pray, we provide—that was the old deal", Wednesday (Odin) reminisces, but his boast glosses over the one thing even he, as an All-Father, cannot help but fear, "being forgotten" (S01 E08). However, his confession, obtained by protagonist Shadow, does not acknowledge an emotional, human need, but the ontological need of a psycho-parasitic entity. For it is in fact not the gods that provide for the humans—as evidenced by mankind's objective progress despite their having abandoned most of their ancient gods—but rather the humans that sustain the gods' very existence and abilities with their minds, hearts, and occasionally their bodies, as well.

Wednesday's fear is not only real, but shared by many of his fellow gods, all of whom have seen their lot worsen noticeably over time, as history ad-

vanced into contemporary, secular, and post-modern times, forcing most of them to struggle just to get by or even stay alive at all. Many have failed to do so and found themselves starved to death by their worshippers having turned apostate. While still perhaps remembered by scholars, they are no longer animated by their worshippers' acts of devotion and have therefore entered a state of suspended animation. It is presumed that (as Vulcan's example will show), should they start being sacrificed to again, or at least by a certain critical mass of their demographic, they might revive. Barring that, they remain little more than historical footnotes, literally confined to oblivion and even with their features effaced, in the more extreme cases when they were entirely lost to time, as in Shadow's visions of the place "under the earth... where the forgotten wait" (Gaiman 2001: 32)

Rebranding the Gods: Old vs. New

Admittedly, some have it better than others. Just because the original generation of gods and assorted magical beings (leprechauns, djinns, gorgons, etc.) was created by homo religiosus attempting to make sense of the natural world, it does not mean an overall more secular society could not produce its own gods, or perhaps more accurately, contemporary idols and specters. The process seems to echo the Christian precept of labeling an idol essentially anything, whether or not strictly speaking a "graven image", even an activity or an ideology, that would completely take over the participant's mind such that the latter should spend the majority of their thoughts or efforts on that single thing or activity. Hence, while the shifting paradigms may have annihilated many gods, they have also contributed to the creation of some others—in focus are Media (shapeshifting god/goddess of communications, entertainment, and social media), Techno Boy (millennial-styled godling of gadgets and hi-tech in general), and Mr. World (seemingly omniscient shapeshifter supervising the global economy), but the more historical Mother Church (referring mostly to the Catholic Church) is also referenced in passing.

On the other hand, a few others have managed to survive (even thrive) by reinventing themselves (or agreeing to be repackaged and repurposed in the media, and by Media), in what Mr. World calls "spiritual Darwinism" (S01 E08). Should the older gods accept his help (in return for their allegiance, notably against their fellow original gods), he promises them not only to become relevant again under the new zeitgeist, but even self-sustainable to a large extent, and thus immortal (at least until the next paradigm shift).

One poignant example of such a situation is provided by Vulcan. Barely mentioned in the novel, the old Roman god of smiths and fire gets ample screen time in the series, used adeptly not just intra-diegetically to connect

several plot lines, but also to link their world to the viewers' world. The parody is clear ("This is my America!"—S01 E07) but, at the same time, it is also quite on the nose, particularly in the contemporary, post-9/11, Republican-voting context: the small town in Alabama under his tutelage seems populated exclusively with gun-toting trigger-happy citizens of all ages that treat strangers (particularly the non-whites) with cold suspicion. As the episode progresses, viewers note the link between the god and his people, to the extent where his word is law (and likely the only law of the land), they do not question his decisions (even though every once in a while citizens die in the steel mill as sacrifices concealed by poor safety standards), and he himself seems to thrive economically, socially, and even spiritually. As the social and political order is reversed across Vulcan's domain, the political layer of the meaning of the dynamic relationship between gods and men becomes once more apparent. Gaiman's gods are also metaphors standing in for absolute rulers, who seize power whether by force or by seduction (or similar cajoling) and manipulate their followers to copiously provide for them ("never say no to food", Mr. Nancy instructs in Gaiman 2001: 52) and carry out their every whim for as long as they (and any heirs) live while simultaneously discouraging resistance and fostering a Stockholm-syndrome type of self-perpetuating dysfunctional bond.

Bragging about his current good fortunes, Vulcan extols capitalism, consumerism, and the particular flavor of individualism that constitutionally enshrines people's right to bear arms. Clearly not hiding in the shadows or eking out a meager living trying to shake humans down for a prayer or a sacrifice like most of his fellow old gods, Vulcan claims to have a much greater following now than in Antiquity thanks to modern technology that has allowed him to enjoy "semi-automatic prayers" (S01 E07), in reference to his personal seal stamped on each bullet he manufactures. Whenever a human fatally uses a gun and/or a bullet made by him, they are—regardless of reason or intent—spilling blood in his name by default, so even without a single actual prayer to him personally (he is, after all, a forgotten god, recast as a magical local tycoon), he has hijacked and reaps the lavish boon of actual worship. In its materialized form, that boon can be distilled into a heady drink for the gods, known as Soma (like the devotional intoxicant used in ancient Hindu ceremonies). Due to its being very hard to come by in the contemporary world, Wednesday tries to bribe Vulcan to join his cause with a small flask of his otherwise very limited personal stash of Soma, but Vulcan ridicules him and shows him his vast supplies of the stuff. This and further instances of his insolence ultimately cause Wednesday to review his plans regarding Vulcan—from an ally to a cause-rallying sacrifice—as he is not only a sellout but seems to have also personally betrayed him to the New Gods by alerting them of his arrival

there, a particularly dangerous traitor at that, since Vulcan has extensive knowledge of Wednesday's past, including of his ability to rise again via self-sacrifice (*i.e.*, sacrificing himself to himself, see his many names including The Hanged One, Riddler, and Lord of the Dead). Hence, Wednesday not only decapitates Vulcan with the very sword he has commissioned him to forge him (thus ironically proving to him the superiority of blades over guns) but also desecrates his godly forges by urinating on them and putting them out, in order for no other god to ever claim his immense power.

As Vulcan's example demonstrates, rebranding is possible if wide and profound enough distribution of the new concept is achieved, even by technical-symbolic means. We might call this "vertical rebranding", since it is a reinterpretation that takes place along a timeline seen as accumulating, like a stack of the centuries—a reinterpretation taking place within the same character. However, as we have already discussed, "horizontal rebranding"—localization—is also possible indeed, as a reinterpretation that effectively creates diverging copies of an original and which, though less frequent than its vertical counterpart, has more impact.

Americanizing the Gods

Earlier in this paper we have acknowledged the transdiegetic establishing concept of America as a cultural melting pot, with diverse nations pouring in over time, together with their respective deities. As history and geography pushed them together, the intermingling nations commonly influenced each other, with sociocultural effects impossible to predict upon their initial contact including homogenized or idiosyncratic customs, myths, and even deities, such that it is frequently possible, in the above context of diverging copies, to trace the dispersion of the horizontally reinterpreted gods along pathways consistent with the movements of their respective human populations.

Everyday experience alone—together with the history of literature up into postmodernism—proves that, given sufficient time and isolation from their original source (e.g. in some new context), stories will inevitably change, as their propagators first subtly, then liberally, add, remove or otherwise alter various elements of the story. Myths are no different, but simply the most dramatic and best documented examples thereof. Therefore—if it is rather the gods that are made and fed by the people—it stands to reason that, in the case of a deity placed by and together with their people in a different geo-cultural paradigm with unprecedented phenomena that would elicit that deity making divergent use of their known abilities or personality, as notoriously demonstrated in various multi-layered culture clashes (see Spangler and Burgess 2017), the said deity would effectively become a new deity, yet still related and recognizable.

Wednesday puts this uncharacteristically plainly when he explains to Shadow that

We may not die easy and we sure as hell don't die well, but we can die. If we're still loved and remembered, something else a whole lot like us comes along and takes our places and the whole damn thing starts all over again. And if we're forgotten, we're done. (Gaiman 2001: 159)

He would know, of course, as he himself is (re)living proof of exactly that. When eventually Shadow encounters the Icelandic master copy, the latter says—in reference to the Odin in North America that Shadow was more familiar with—that “he was me, but I am not him” (Gaiman 2001: 297). The novel makes it clear that the first Viking settlers of North America brought their gods with them (through blood sacrifices in their name as soon as they made a permanent camp), and those gods stayed there even after the Vikings themselves died out, to be brought back to life by the Scandinavian immigrants to the assembling United States of the 19th century. Although nominally Christian, they were also superstitious people in a new and hard world, highly interested in staying alive and besting others, particularly in lucrative businesses which often involved speculative luck. As such, their new circumstances would have been highly reminiscent of similar ones in which their ancestors would pray to Odin for success and glory in battle. As tough competitiveness and shrewd incisiveness proved to be more viable than urban civility and Christian morality on the American frontier, they again remembered Odin, particularly in his shadier aspects, the Odin who was not just a consummate warrior but also an accomplished wizard and trickster, not too unlike Loki. Thus—as befitting the American Wild West—the older Odin that their starved ancestors had brought with them to the Newfoundland shores increasingly has his more morally grey aspects enhanced, morphing for all intents and purposes into a divergent new entity, the smooth middle-aged huckster going by “Mr. Wednesday”.

Throughout the story, he is seen to be preparing for an upcoming Armageddon-type conflict pitting the old gods against the new gods. Wednesday calls it the war for their survival, while World thinks of it as a Darwinian inevitability, with the old ones having become “obsolete” and they “the paradigm revolution” (S01 E01), but neither one seems particularly concerned with any civilian casualties, just with the number of followers they manage to recruit for their respective causes. Wednesday—mostly driven by Shadow Moon, reflector protagonist on his own personal journey of initiation and discovery—takes a tour of the country, seeking out old friends and rivals to persuade to join the conflict, with some degree of success, particularly after his claim that Vulcan was killed by the new gods riles up a lot of the old ones. But World does not have anywhere near a

similarly vast pool of potential allies to resort to (which, in itself, is an allegory of the general secularization of the world, preceded by the Church's literal demonization and extermination of the ancient gods). Consequently, he prefers to forge new connections by preying on the weakest or most approachable links in Wednesday's network by making them "offers they can't refuse" that give them a new lease on life.

Of course, the thinly veiled allegory here is directly related to the ways in which various aspects of the human experience have been transformed, both from Them to Us and from Then to Now. Globalization is but a more palatable term for the Westernization of the world, particularly its Americanization—and it is very fitting indeed that the two factions of international gods naturalized (all rebranded, to varying extents) in the USA should go head to head on American soil, at Home on the Rock, a place whose name suggests reliance and even preternatural stability but which is in fact commercially vacuous and recent, and whose corny dioramas express simultaneously the absurdity and the innocence, the grandeur and the loneliness of the American collective psyche. Globalization does provide a lot of new opportunities, but the opening up of new markets and conceptual frontiers differs little in spread and control to the earlier colonial empires of the Western powers, and quickly establishes, in turn, just another mainstream and its new set of normativities that will once more oppose its dissidents, its new peripheral elements, and oppress them into either submission or destruction (as it may be said of Bilquis and Mad Sweeney, respectively). It also levels the playing field, such that the pressure of the mainstream—initially promoted as bright and streamlined modernity and progress—can stamp out the traditional aspects of a culture with the damning label of "obsolete" by conveniently overlooking western modernity's inescapable moral debt to tradition as suggested by Techno Boy's petulant ignorance and lack of vision. Political correctness guidelines dictate that outlier cultures cannot be directly or openly opposed—just as World never directly fights the old gods—but they can be marginalized and insidiously bullied into adhesion and assimilation—in the same way that World and Media threaten to take back their gift of rebranded life and glory for their underlings who would attempt insubordination.

One example is Ostara of the Dawn, whose scene from the novel is extended into a drama- and action-packed full episode in the series. Initially the Germanic goddess of spring and fertility (Eostre), potentially already rebranding a proto-Indo-European goddess of the dawn (as Eos was, to the ancient Greeks), she is worshipped globally as Easter. When he courts her allegiance, Wednesday makes the point that she has stooped much beneath her godly dignity, as she contents herself with receiving the

(albeit plentiful) “Jesus scraps” (S01 E08), the collateral worship she obtains by personifying the semi-hidden original celebration. In this case it is rather the holiday that has undergone rebranding first and the goddess had to rapidly adapt. Easter’s worship is mostly literal and superficial, by identity transfer, but it still works, the result of a rebranding process originally carried out by Mother Church, and which Media continues via commercial hype. This is, in fact, her threat when she discovers Easter has been speaking to Wednesday—the polite but less-than-friendly reminder that she is still around only because early modernity has (re)introduced the watered-down Germanic elements of the original spring festival, such as the hares and the eggs. Media’s pressure ultimately backfires and Wednesday prevails upon Ostara to reclaim her dignity and her true calling as goddess of nature, able to give but also take away fertility. In so doing, he has maneuvered her into a devastating gambit that precipitates the war between the two factions, but the moment is, transdiegetically and academically, also a reminder of Easter making a comeback in terms of real-world worship by Wiccan and other New-Age followers.

The relationship between the new gods and their full-time underlings is also significant. Arguably, this is another case of center vs. periphery with elitist or even colonial undertones. Those that serve the new gods on a permanent basis are also rebranded gods of sorts, perhaps less likely to have ever featured as gods in any actual pantheons, but they are personifications of commonplace yet essential components of human life—Mr. Wood, Mr. Stone, Mr. Road, and Mr. Town—just as much in the modern cities as they were in the past or still are in rural or developing areas, whose scoffed-at parochial representatives they seem to be (Now vs. Then and Us vs. Them, respectively). More sinister are the silent, faceless, and never-in-human-form Spooks (as the book calls them) or Children (as referred to in the series). They are deployed as ruthless enforcers by and for Techno Boy and Media, who can at-will summon or dismiss them, cause their ranks to multiply, essentially use them as quasi-sentient tools. Such attributes, together with their uncanny propensity for intimidation and violent frenzy once deployed (as evidenced in the initial encounter between Shadow and half a dozen of such Spooks, which nearly lynch him), make them likely metaphors of cyber-violence, whether through bullying (its prevalence in teens could help explain their name of “Children”) or terrorism and other forms of asymmetrical warfare waged via sleeper cells and insidious social media-based radicalization churning out misguided soldiers as mindless as the Spooks are faceless.

It is also no happenstance that the main new gods are shapeshifters (occasionally even smugly so), as it is an apt expression for the constant state of flux that contemporary social and political realities seem to be

characterized by, and their associated moral relativism. As the world seems to expand under globalization, everyone finds themselves able to reach out to anyone else and even become whoever they want. But with such ostensibly great freedom, the risk for its nefarious exploitation is never far removed, despite any sanitized, sleek pretenses. This is a fairly accurate description of Mr. World, particularly as he is fleshed out (or rather, pixelated?) in the TV series (in which he also sees far more characterization than in the novel, where he stayed the mysterious puppet master almost to the end), to be “a global capitalist [that] cares more about a product’s success than its usefulness”, with his fascination for systems and his greed for potentially weaponizable information (“Ultimately everything is all systems interlaced”) that, in 2017 exponentially more than in 2001, is highly illustrative of our fears of corporate data mining and economic-political surveillance (McNally 2017).

So when one reinvents themselves by slightly or profoundly altering who they used to be or even who they believed they were, their changes will inevitably ripple out across their residential systems, creating eddies of (usually vicious) circles. Cutting to the core of it all is the question of whether they change because their circumstances have made it a survival necessity—as in the case of many of the old gods trying to fit into a modern world all too willing to dispose of them and casually move on—or do they do so because it allows them to immorally profit from the ensuing confusion and chaos?

The latter path is exactly that which the most conspicuous leaders of the two factions in *American Gods* have chosen, as the “coming storm”, the inevitable clash of the mythological creatures to have survived into contemporary times, turns out to be a monstrous “two-man con” perpetrated together by Wednesday (the North-American Odin) and the alleged Mr. World (none other than trickster god Loki in one of his most successful disguises). The ruse is intended to ensure a last-ditch power boost for the both of them, so they may cheat the death of oblivion a little longer. When sprung, the trap works such that Odin is fed and restored to glory by the blood spilled in his name in battle. Cleverly, his request of his allies for such verbal homage before each kill does not sound out of place initially as he has begrudgingly earned the old gods’ trust—their faith, even—as their rallying symbol and inspiration, so few of them bother to look behind the meaning of this apparent proclamation of allegiance to see it for what it truly is, devotional blood magic. In turn, as a god of chaos, Loki is nourished by the very pandemonium he has unleashed around him, and it should hardly come as any kind of surprise for the knowledgeable Christian reader that there should be an equal sign placed between “Mr. World” (see “The Ruler of This World”) and the “Lie Smith” in “Low-Key Lyesmith”,

the name by which he is introduced to Shadow in one of the earliest scenes in the novel (see “The Father of Lies”).

Conclusions

Ultimately, the story that Neil Gaiman weaves in *American Gods* proves to not really be a story about gods after all, but one that spirals out into increasingly far-reaching implications about America, about our globalized civilization, and about all of us in general. According to literary critic Claire E. White,

Gaiman’s work seems to act as a mirror which reflects what people want to see in it... an examination of America’s culture, its myths and the pagan influences that exist solidly beside such Americana as roadside attractions and Easter egg hunts. (White 2001)

There is indeed a satisfying sense of humanistic empowerment in the understanding that the gods he has depicted actually depend—and desperately so, often for their very survival—on humans, rather than the other way around. But the gods are used here primarily as metaphors, with their power struggles working as allegorical reminders of the intricate and ever-shifting cultural and political relationships that have created, and continue to drive, our civilization, if at times unpredictably so. *American Gods* is a story about immigration and adaptation, about tradition and modernity, about the mainstream and the marginal, and about leaders and followers, which forces the readers to ponder just what it is they believe in, and especially to what exactly they sacrifice.

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