

META

morphing

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editor

*Visual Transformation
and the Culture of Quick-Change*



Cultural Transformations
from Greek Myth
From Mutation to Morphing to
Children's Media Culture

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The possession of originality cannot make an artist unconventional; it drives him further into convention, obeying the law of the art itself, which seeks constantly to reshape itself from its own depths, and which works through geniuses for its metamorphoses, as it works through minor talents for mutation.

Northrop Frye

We are more willing to act in the U.S. like a U.S. company, in Europe like a European company, and in Japan like a Japanese company. That's the only way a global company like Sony can truly become a significant player in each of the world's major markets.

Akio Morita, founding chairman of Sony

Origins

These two epigraphs (recycled from two of my earlier works) function as launchpad for this essay on mutation and morphing, propelling me both backward with Frye in search of mythic roots for postmodernist shape-shifters and forward with Sony to reveal strategies of survival for marketing geniuses who increasingly replace artists in the global economy of the 1980s and 1990s. The meanings of these quotes will be transformed within this new discursive context—a study of the recent meteoric rise of this pair of tropes (mutation and morphing) within children's media culture.

More specifically, I will trace how these images of cultural transformation have been mythologized in those two controversial bands of shape-shifting superheroes, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, who rose to global cult status in the mid-1980s, and the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers, who displaced the Turtles in the 1990s.

Both of these cults built on the earlier success of the toy genre known as "Transformers," a species of action figure that enables young owners, with minor deft twists, to convert a formidable creature (robot, monster, or superhero) into a high-powered vehicle or weapon, and vice versa.¹ The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles made their pop culture debut in 1984 in a limited-edition comic book designed by two young unknown American artists, Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman, who thought they were parodying superheroes. But the myth and marketing of these transformers soon captured the attention of children and the media first in the United States and then worldwide, generating an intense "Turtlemania" that spawned a proliferating catalog of licensed products, including action figures, plush toys, pajamas, T-shirts, Halloween costumes, cereals, juices, pizza, lunch boxes, martial arts schools, party supplies, board games, toy weapons, video cassettes, books, calendars, and talking toothbrushes. You name it, they licensed it! The phenomenal selling power of this cult began to be fully registered by the media in 1987 when despite a decline in the sales of boys' action figures, Playmates introduced a new set of collectible TMNT action figures, which quickly sold out in toy stores across America. By the 1990 Christmas season, there were forty-four of these Playmate action figures on the market. Not only were the Turtles impressive transformers within their narrative domain (miraculously mutating into giant, talking, pizza-loving amphibians after having been exposed to a mysterious toxic goo in an urban sewer and then quickly being transformed into martial arts experts by their Japanese rat guru, Master Splinter), but they also were fabulously successful in fluidly moving from one mass medium to another, carrying not only Playmates but also their other associates along for the lucrative ride. Their hour-long animated TV show, which premiered in the fall of 1990 on CBS, quickly made that station the top-rated network in Saturday morning television.

When the Hong Kong distributor Golden Harvest released the first TMNT movie in 1990, it took in over \$25 million the opening weekend (at that time one of the biggest-grossing three-day openings in history). The Turtles myth scored similar successes in videotape rentals, home video game sales, and arcade games, reaching their commercial peak in 1991, the

year my own book about them was published and shortly after the 1990 passing of the Children's TV Act, which led to a closer critical scrutiny of children's programming. Although you can still find the Turtles in the land of TV syndication, by the May 1994 sweeps, they were off the charts and their sales in licensed products had seriously slipped. Yet between 1984 and 1994, more than \$7 billion of Turtlized merchandise was sold. Ten years isn't bad for any buying bonanza, particularly in children's pop culture, where few besides Barbie survive.

Carefully scrutinizing the phenomenal international success of these mutant transformers was a young, Egyptian-born Israeli independent producer named Haim Saban, who emigrated to Hollywood in 1985, only one year after the Turtles' debut. According to his banking agent John Shuman, Saban's driving ambition was to become "a full-service software provider" with a "plan . . . clearly calculated at exploiting the children's market internationally."² What Saban found in the Turtles was a successful formula for a cultural myth that could enhance a global marketing strategy—a combination of pan-Asian martial arts action with a wholesome gang of heroic American teens. In other words, a comic conflation of Hong Kong and Hollywood superheroes to colonize the world! Buying the rights to a Japanese action series for children (which was already popular in that nation) and adapting it to kids media culture in the States, he hoped to make it marketable worldwide, which is precisely what he succeeded in doing with *The Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*, which debuted on American television in 1993. Transforming the Japanese live-action heroes into a band of ordinary American high school kids, he diversified their identities in terms of gender and ethnicity while retaining the Japanese action footage (where they are garbed in unisex jumpsuits, helmets, and boots that reveal no flesh or nationality). He also retained the talking head of their Master Zordon, as well as their Japanese antagonists, the villainous Rita Repulsa and her legions of invasive aliens. Thus despite the tropic shift from mutation to morphing in his heroes, on the levels of both myth and marketing, Saban's hybrid creation (in Frye's terms) was more like a minor mutation than a true metamorphosis.

Yet like their amphibious precursors, the Rangers also transported their power brokers to new heights—especially Saban himself, who, according to Mike Freeman, "is one of the few truly independent independents."³ Despite the multinational diversity of his backers and the bonding among his band of heroes, when Saban uses the term "we" (unlike Sony's Akio Morita), he is usually referring to himself. Thus his profits

from the Power Rangers could surpass even those of the Turtles, even if their bonanza doesn't survive a full decade like that of their precursors. With the long run of the Turtles clearly in mind, even as early as 1993 Saban was calling the Power Rangers a "ten-plus-year, multibillion dollar franchise. . . . Our whole approach—our investments, our expectations for the return on investment—is based on a ten-year plan and not a two-year plan."⁴ By December of that year, Freeman reported: "Nearing the close of the Christmas sales season, sole toy licensee Bandai Co. has sold close to one million of the *Power Ranger* action figures, putting it on a faster early pace than the record sales of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* dolls five years ago."⁵

The other two power brokers who profited from the meteoric rise of the Rangers were Fox TV (which was then struggling to join ABC, CBS, and NBC as one of the top national networks) and the new president of Fox's Children's Network, Margaret Loesch. Frequently called "the Queen of Kidvid," Loesch (before joining Fox in 1990) was at NBC and Hanna-Barbera, where she did *The Smurfs*, and then moved to Marvel, where she developed successful television series such as *G.I. Joe*, *Transformers*, *My Little Pony*, and *Muppet Babies*. Being a newcomer at Fox, she still had difficulty persuading her new colleagues to trust her instincts. In a "Special Report on Children's Television" for *Mediaweek*, Eric Schmuckler claims that "Loesch relishes telling how she fought to put the show on against the judgment of her staff, bosses, and affiliates."⁶ In fall 1993, just three weeks after its premiere on Fox on weekdays at 7:30 A.M. (generally considered a "throwaway" time slot), *Power Rangers* captured first place in the ratings and remained number one (with viewers under age eighteen) for the entire season. With younger kids from two through eleven, the show had an amazing 52 percent share. This new popularity helped move the show to the privileged Saturday morning lineup, where it almost immediately took first place and helped the Fox Children's Network become (after only four years on the air) number one in the \$650 million kids TV market. After a comparable four years of success for the Rangers, their popularity has already begun to subside. Unlike that of the Turtles, their movie (released in 1995) was a big disappointment, and it is now doubtful whether they will fulfill the ten-year plan projected by Saban. But at the time of this writing (August 1997), the latest incarnation of their series, *Power Rangers Turbo* (which recharges their selling power by driving them back to their roots in the Transformer toy genre), is still playing on Saturday morning television.

Thus far I have been talking mainly about marketing and saying very little about the mythic appeal of the Turtles and Power Rangers or the relationship of that appeal to the transformative tropes of mutation and morphing. Although the popularity of both sets of superheroes is now in decline, they have entered the popular imagination of global culture as an optimistic myth of comic transformation not just for kids but for cultural theorists talking about the reproduction of postmodernist subjectivity. For example, if you turn to the home page of cyberspace theorist Sherry Turkle, you can download a video that shows the Zordon-like bald head of Michel Foucault morphing into a Power Ranger, implying, as Edward Rothstein puts it, that "the morphing of the philosopher into a pop figure may support Foucault's argument that identity is elastic."⁷ This argument is consistent with one I made in *Playing with Power*, which read the myth of the Mutant Turtles as a global force that contributes to the mass reproduction of postmodernist subjectivity.

Evoking the comic prototype of Proteus (the seagod who fluidly changes shape), the Turtles' . . . status as amphibians, teenagers, mutants, and American ninjas with Italian names and California surfer jargon quadruples their capacity as transformers, making them the ultimate sliding signifiers: they can easily move from an animated TV series into a live-action movie, and they can transgress borders of species, race, ethnicity, generation, and media. While such cross-cultural malleability might help construct subjects who are less prejudiced against alien Others, the changes promoted are far from revolutionary.⁸

Before we can fully address what the Mutant Turtles and Power Rangers have in common or, for that matter, how they differ (as mutants or morphs), we need briefly to explore what was at stake in some of these earlier representations of shape-shifters, for only then can we determine in what sense the Turtles and Rangers represent a cultural innovation.

Mythic Roots

Metamorphosis is a trope that is central to creation myths from many cultures, where it frequently serves as an image of creation or destruction, reward or punishment, growth or decay, or the passage from life to death. It is also a defining formalist feature of dreams and their characteristic tropes of condensation and displacement, where the mere temporal or spatial proximity of two juxtaposed images can, when narrativized, be read as transformative change—a cognitive process that is fundamental to

flip books, surrealist jolts, trick films, animation, the basic illusion of cinema, and the visual perception of movement.

Although we can find shape-shifters in myths from most cultures, a complete genealogy of such figures is far beyond the scope of this essay.⁹ What I intend to do here is merely suggest some of the issues at stake in a few of the best known of these “transformers” from earlier eras in Western culture, including Proteus, the Egyptian sea god colonized by the Greeks; Tiresias, the Greek prophet; and Morpheus, the Roman god of dreams. Although several Greek and Roman goddesses (such as Athena and Hera, as well as several female figures in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*) were also capable of shape-shifting, significantly it was male figures in these cultures who were primarily identified with these powers.

In contrast to the Turtles and the Power Rangers, who star in a string of serial adventure narratives that celebrate their ingenuity and ability to survive, singular classical shape-shifters such as Proteus, Tiresias, and Morpheus played only supporting roles. Certainly none of them was an action hero wielding a sword like Achilles or outwitting his enemies like Odysseus. In fact, they didn’t benefit directly from their own supernatural powers. Nor did they help the creative power brokers (like Homer, Sophocles, and Ovid) who depicted them (the way the Turtles empowered Eastman and Laird, and the Rangers Saban and Loesch). Nor did the classical shape-shifters enhance the networked powers of the supreme overlords they served (such as Poseidon and Zeus, the way our modern shifters elevated CBS and FOX). Instead, they functioned merely as mediums, each with his own favorite vehicle (magic, prophecy, or dreams) for narrow-casting divine data to human petitioners so that these users could enhance *their* powers of survival. In other words (or in Propitian terms), these shifters were helpers rather than heroes.

Proteus appears in book 4 of Homer’s *Odyssey* (c. 850 B.C.), where he is described by his daughter Eidothea as “the Egyptian, immortal Proteus, [who] knows all the depths of the sea, [and] is Poseidon’s underling,” and whose magic arts enable him to take the form of “all creatures that come forth and move on the earth, he will be water and magical fire.”¹⁰ He uses these dazzling transformations (into a lion, serpent, leopard, boar, fluid water, and tree with towering branches) not to gain knowledge but rather to frighten and evade those who want access to his divine data.

Proteus’s human counterpart was Tiresias, the blind Theban seer, who also possessed these combined powers of divine knowledge and physical transformation. In one mythic version of his back story, in punishment

for witnessing the coupling of a pair of snakes, he was temporarily transformed into a woman. (Undoubtedly a sex change in the opposite direction, from woman to man, would not have been considered a punishment.) Because of the special knowledge this hermaphroditic experience provided (a connection that is operative for shamans in many different cultures), Tiresias was later asked by Zeus and Hera to adjudicate their dispute over which gender experiences greater pleasure during sex. After responding that women's pleasure is nine times greater than men's, Tiresias was punished by Hera with blindness, whereby Zeus, in divine compensation, granted him the gift of prophecy. Hence, second sex metamorphosed into second sight.¹¹ In Sophoclean tragedies like *Oedipus* (427 B.C.) and *Antigone* (442 B.C.), Tiresias's shape-shifting is not even mentioned. In the former he is described by the Chorus as "the godly prophet . . . in whom alone of mankind truth is native," and by Oedipus as the "alone one that can rescue us."¹² Yet his special knowledge does exactly the reverse: it reveals and thereby helps fulfill the full horror of the tragedy. Tiresias functions as a divining mirror in which defiant royal petitioners can read their own cruel destinies imposed by punishing gods.¹³ Whereas Tiresias confirms the tragic fates of arrogant kings, Proteus performs his transformations within the essentially comic world of the epic, which celebrates the miraculous survival powers of its hero Odysseus. It is hardly surprising, then, that Homer would emphasize Proteus's powers of shape-shifting rather than those of seeing (as in the case of Tiresias).

Like Proteus, Morpheus, the Roman god of dreams, usually performs within a comic world where the emphasis is similarly on shape-shifting rather than on prophetic knowledge. In fact, his very name derives from his ability fluidly to assume the form of any being within his virtual realm of dreams, an impersonation that frequently brings about a transformation in the dreamer. He is quite literally, then, a medium of representation. Although dreams (like prophecy) are a source of hidden knowledge (especially about the past and future), they are unique in being the prototypical medium of transformation for the individual, the culture, and the species, one that mediates between biological programming and cultural imprinting and that formalistically features visual quick-changes even more fluid than those in contemporary digital morphs.

One of the fictional worlds inhabited by Morpheus is that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (first century A.D.), which, despite the potential sadness of its mythic tales of rape, murder, and unrequited love, still generates a comic spirit of resilience and wit primarily through physical transformations.

Such morphs link not only his stories but also the fates of his victors and victims, who experience them either as punishment or as compensatory transcendence. For example, in Ovid's tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, Morpheus assumes the form of the drowned husband who appears in his wife's dream to tell her of his death. Determined to join him, the grieving Alcyone rushes to the shore the next morning, where she finds the corpse of Ceyx. Instead of drowning, she is transformed by the gods into a bird and joined in flight by her husband, who has undergone a similar metamorphosis. Thus this potentially tragic story is transformed by Ovid into a delightful flight of fantasy on eternal love.

These few examples suggest that classical tropes of shape-shifting were contextualized by genre and that the comic/tragic divide was definitive. In comedy, morphing served as a primary mode of survival and flexibility, both privileged values. Here transformations took many forms and were quick, easy, and reversible, as they are in the essentially comic myths of our own Mutant Turtles and Power Rangers. Conversely, tragedy demanded commitment to a single shape or body of values. Even if a tragic hero doubted the existence of absolutes, he or she could prove the absolute value of an object of worship (whether it be love, honor, duty, and so forth) through a willingness to sacrifice everything else to preserve it—by acting *as if* it were absolute, even if that meant having to die for this simulation. That is one reason why tragic transformations had to be painful and irreversible.

If Proteus was the archetype of comic transformation with his exuberant catalog of serial identities, then Narcissus (rather than Tiresias) was his tragic antithesis, stubbornly committed to his singular conversion into an unchanging imaginary reflection. This pair evokes not only the binary of comedy and tragedy but also its modern equivalent, sadism and masochism (at least as theorized by Deleuze)¹⁴—with promiscuous protean substitutions of frightening, malleable bodies controlled by one who is all-knowing pitted against a beautiful narcissistic image of perfectly mirror-matched lovers forever suspended within an intimate specular embrace. However, within this classical system there is still some leeway for mobility, for as we have seen, a comic protean shifter can be transformed into a tragic seer (like Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *The Bacchae*), and the tragic fates of doomed lovers (like Pyramus and Thisbe) can be softened with posthumous transformations in Ovid's comic *Metamorphoses*.

This mobility becomes much more fluid during the Renaissance, as can be seen in Shakespearean theater, particularly in a comedy such as

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1600), where potentially tragic lovers are foolishly yearning for faery changelings and asinine shifters and where a parodic restaging of Ovid's *Pyramus and Thisbe* (with workmen performing protean impersonations of a lion, wall, and moon) becomes hilarious. Such mobility can also be found in tragedies such as *Othello* (1622), *Lear* (1608), and *Richard III* (1597), where mercurial comic characters are transformed into defiant, duplicitous villains (Iago, Edmund, and Richard, respectively). And it is even possible to read *Othello* in light of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, particularly when Theseus observes the similarities in the transformative powers of lovers, madmen, and poets.¹⁵

Whereas the destinies revealed through classical mediums like Tiresias and Proteus are part of a divine system of justice—with its punishments, rewards, and retributions—those in Shakespearean tragedy are frequently improvised by inventive villains who are dissatisfied with their own subordinate position in the prevailing structure. During the Renaissance, transformative tropes increasingly take on the trace of social and political mobility that threatens existing boundaries of class as well as those of genre. This dynamic is certainly not restricted to Shakespeare but can be found in many Renaissance works structured around tropes of transformation. Two such works proved pivotal for the development of modern politics and the modern novel: Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513), a handbook on how to turn shape-shifting into a statesman's weapon in his quest for power, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), where not only windmills are transformed into giants and an aged Renaissance reader into a valiant medieval knight-errant but also a parodic romance into a new mode of fiction capable of dialogizing tragic and comic perspectives.

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1916) inverts both of these legacies. Gregor, the passive, guilt-ridden protagonist of this absurd modernist novel, is a shape-shifter who awakens one morning and simply finds himself transformed into a gigantic insect. As evasive as Proteus's metamorphoses, this grotesque transformation enables Gregor to escape the tedious, dehumanizing job by which he supports his oppressive family and the petty social ambitions imposed on him by his bourgeois milieu. This transformation functions as an "as if" simulation, not (as in classical tragedy) for an absolute value one could die *for* but a painful modernist subjectivity one could die *from*.

By the end of the nineteenth century, transformative tropes had acquired formidable new powers as driving theoretical engines of subversion, particularly in the work of Freud, where they become central to the

language of dreams and its dreamwork codes of condensation and displacement, and to primary process thinking and the language of subjectivity, with its endless chain of substitutions, all of which undermine the authority of rational thought; in the work of Darwin, where they become naturalized as the primary mechanisms of evolution, which downgrade the ontological status of the rival biblical account from truth to myth; and in the work of Marx, where they become revolutionary change in the service of history, requiring ruptures that are violent and irreversible and transformations that punish and destroy obsolete systems. All these engines help drive the subversive transformation of Kafka's protagonist, which through a crisis of hysteria and subjectivity occurs as a sudden rupture that violates all rational authority of the prevailing social order and even reverses the evolution of the species. Although his radical metamorphosis leads to his own injury, imprisonment, paralysis, and death, Gregor nevertheless succeeds in evading the banal happy ending that awaits the rest of his family. In this modernist tale of masochism and horror, the fatal transformation is *both* punishment and ironic compensation.

Gregor's metamorphosis helps prefigure the legions of self-willed insectival transformations that infest William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959), changes that are shorn of masochism and guilt but are even more grotesque than Kafka's with their comic obscenities and sadistic excesses. The exuberant outpourings of a junkie's subjectivity, this dystopic "word horde" presents a satiric vision of American corruption, "a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork."¹⁶ What is exposed is "a basic formula of 'evil' virus: *The Algebra of Need*," which drives not only drug addiction and erotic desire but also the capitalist lust for money and power.¹⁷ In this fluid world of constant metamorphosis, where naked creatures called Mugwumps "secrete an addicting fluid from their erect penises which prolongs life by slowing metabolism" and "the Dream Police disintegrate in globs of rotten ectoplasm,"¹⁸ dependent drug addicts play parodic tragic heroes, always longing for a high-protean quick-change to evade interrogators and to disavow their commitment to a substance that requires a daily sacrifice of all other values. It is a world where everything liquefies into a protoplasmic ooze that proves more malleable than Power Goo. Where all bones, flesh, and bodies, all rooms, cities, nations, and languages, all sentences, paragraphs, stories, dreams, and genres morph promiscuously into each other, dissolving into dystopic software for a nonelectronic cyberspace.

These transformational tropes of drug experience underwent a dramatic conversion in the sixties, when they pulsed between utopic rushes and dystopic bummers, responsive to each new substance as it came onto the market. They helped spawn a new species of multisensory imagery that was widely used to describe and link different types of music and sexual experiences. Mind-expanding hallucinogens such as acid, mescaline, and peyote came to be associated with the Beatles and with the valley orgasm of Tantra yoga, while the quicksilver changes of coke and speed were linked to peak orgasms and the Rolling Stones. While Jagger was morphing into demons and outlaws in a tune like "Sympathy for the Devil," in a transformative film like *Performance* (1970), and in a violent concert like Altamont, the Beatles were acquiring new spiritual power in India and acolytes who believed unconditionally in their capacity for unlimited transformation and growth. As the Beatles became a household word worldwide, they reinscribed the insectival tropes of Kafka and Burroughs by purging them of all grotesque connotations, liberating them in strawberry fields forever and letting them take flight with Lucy in the sky with diamonds like Ovid's metamorphosed lovers. Both they and their fans had faith that no matter what medium they turned to, they would be able to create not merely lucrative ancillary products (like the Turtles and Rangers) but also new creative highs. Their power was based partly on a belief in the magical nature of their collaboration—one that combined the talents of four unique individual talents so that each experienced a radical power surge whenever they performed together. In other words, the whole was far greater than the sum of its parts, which led to a fetishizing of their bonding.

Like the Beatles, the myths of the Turtles and Rangers also promote an optimistic belief in creative collaboration and unlimited growth and also fetishize group bonding. In fact, none of these three bands has a designated leader. Unlike Elvis or even the Stones (whose headliner was first Brian Jones and then Mick Jagger) and unlike those lone superheroes from earlier decades of American pop culture, such as Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and Wonder Woman (who sometimes had sidekicks) or Old World demonic doublers, such as vampires, werewolves, and Messrs. Hyde, the Beatles, Turtles, and Rangers all function as egalitarian members of groups who offer their fans an expressive choice in their favorite object of identification. Indeed, Loesch seemed aware of the importance of this appeal in the Power Rangers, for whenever their series came under attack,

she defended it by claiming: "It's an ensemble group kids have picked up on"¹⁹—an argument that also applies to *X-Men* (Saban's other successful series on Fox) as well as to *TMNT*. This group ethos acquired new ideological meaning in the myths of the Turtles and Rangers, where it helped negotiate the cross-cultural gap between the American celebration of individualism and the Japanese commitment to the group.

Another similarity these postmodernist shifters shared with the Beatles is the transformative appropriation of artistic traditions from other cultures. Whereas the Turtles consciously poached the names of old masters from Italy (Michelangelo, Raphael, Donatello, and Leonardo) and martial arts from Asia and the Rangers an actual program from Japanese television, the Beatles (as well as the Stones) freely adapted African American music (as well as classical Indian music). Although the Beatles and Stones presented these borrowings as an homage, the economic dynamics were essentially the same, for the bands were the ones who profited. To make matters even more problematic, such appropriations were usually accompanied by an implicit rationalization that the "source" culture lacked the required know-how to turn these artistic assets into viable mainstream products in the world market.

In the case of African American borrowings, this appropriation was increasingly challenged, partly through a compelling demonstration of a culturally distinctive approach to transformative tropes, which play such a crucial role in the black aesthetic on so many different registers. The richness of this cultural distinctiveness is perhaps most apparent in the improvisational structures of jazz, with its lyrical flights by legendary players such as Charlie "Bird" Parker and Louis Armstrong and innovative scat singers such as Ella Fitzgerald; in the protean multiple identities of Ralph Ellison's evasive *Invisible Man* (1952) and in the regenerative transformations of a political shifter like Malcolm X, who both used plasticity as a tactic of survival to cope with racism and the legacy of slavery; and in an artistic stylization of everyday actions such as talking, walking, dancing, and athletic moves—a stylization that generates new cultural forms like voguing and hip-hop and that transforms boxing and basketball into poetry in motion, spawning a new brand of superhero like Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan (or their dystopic doubles, Tyson and Rodman).

The cultural specificity of these transformative tropes is brilliantly mythologized in Ishmael Reed's satiric novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Reed presents a black counterhistory of the cultural wars, tracing them all the way back to the struggle in ancient Egypt between Osiris and his censorious

brother Set, the primary precursors for the opposition between the Greek gods Dionysus and Apollo. Depicting both brothers as transformers, Reed credits Osiris with being the primary spiritual source of "Jes grew," which he transmitted to Dionysus, who in turn taught the Greeks the Osirian art of revelry and dance, a tradition that runs through history and in America begets ragtime, jazz, and the Harlem Renaissance. As James Weldon Johnson is quoted as saying, "'Jes grew' songs . . . had been sung for years all through the South. The words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible and belonged to nobody."²⁰ In contrast, Set is presented as the founder of the Atonists (some of whose leading advocates are Moses, Milton, Freud, and Frazer), who preach work, discipline, and militarism and who try to marshal, suppress, and exploit this spiritual heritage. Reed rewrites all other cultural histories in the process, appropriating those of the Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Jews, just as those cultures had earlier defined the African American experience. What Reed brilliantly demonstrates is the power that these transformative tropes have in the discursive wars of American popular culture—where the stakes are not simply in telling the "truth" but in presenting the most compelling version of one's own mythology. There may be no more important battlefield in these wars than that arena where conflicting versions of those myths are first transmitted to children.

Of the Species, Mutant Turtles, and Morphin' Rangers

One day while on Larchmont Avenue (a street full of posh boutiques in a white middle-class neighborhood in Los Angeles), I witnessed a fascinating scene. A young mother was walking down the street with a baby girl in a stroller and her four-year-old son by her side. Suddenly the boy jumped into a martial arts pose, shouting, "Go, go, Power Rangers!" as a look of pride and supreme pleasure spread across his face. When I got a little closer, I realized that this little flaneur was responding to a large Power Rangers poster hanging in the display window of a shop. I was intrigued with the question of why this experience was so pleasurable for him. Perhaps it was because the poster seemed to be specifically addressing *him*, rather than his mother or baby sister (who was apparently occupying more of Mom's attention than he was). Not only did the poster acknowledge his importance as a knowledgeable player within a culture, but it helped him map the world and his own place within it—a map that directly linked his own television set to shop windows on the boulevard (or, as some cultural theorists might say, domestic space and the public

sphere). The poster also tested his cognitive powers, demonstrating that he was successfully able to recognize these connections and, even more important, that he knew what to do in response—he knew the correct moves and mantra and could perform them with a sense of drama and style.

These moves functioned as a form of juvenile voguing—like the kind performed in the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990), where adult “children” (as they are called by those interviewed on camera) fiercely compete in elaborate masquerade balls in Spanish Harlem that reassure marginalized gay men of color that they can “pass” (as a woman, straight man, white VIP, or whatever) and can feel safe as they move between “legendary houses” and public display (those protective alternative spaces of their own creation). A similar thing was happening for this boy and for other little kids in their bedrooms and playgrounds, dressed in the Power Rangers drag that empowers them to pass for teens who range more freely across different media and neighborhoods. What I had witnessed was the interpellation of a four-year-old subject into consumer culture. As part of the Power Rangers commercial network (and functioning as an Althusserian ideological state apparatus), the poster was hailing him as a postmodernist subject, and he was responding loud and clear to that call. That call and response made him feel empowered, and this feeling was the source of his pleasure.

Similar scenarios have undoubtedly been (and are still being) played out with the Turtles, for both bands of superheroes reassure children they are courageous comic survivors who can thrive even in urban sewers and public schools, despite dire threats of toxic waste, pollution, gangbangers, random violence, urban decay, and other contemporary problems that provide plots for their proliferating episodic adventures. These superheroes also give their young fans a sense of cognitive mastery, for having several transformers per set provides not only options for expressively choosing a personal favorite but also a cognitive challenge for mastering the codes that enable fans to distinguish one from another. Although the Turtles and the Rangers (once in their unisex costumes) all look the same, both sets are coded with individualizing names, colors, weapons, special powers, and personality traits that fans must memorize. Given that the Turtles carry unique “designer” labels poached from great Italian Renaissance artists, kids must learn the names of these masters and how to discriminate among their styles, but in the process they also learn how to substitute fighting and marketing for making art.

Besides the codes already listed, the Rangers also have totem animals

called Zords, who function very much like astrological signs. The Power Rangers plots are usually very hard for the uninitiated to follow because the pacing and transformations move faster than Roadrunner cartoons. Thus they train youngsters how to read narrative, or more specifically serial television (as well as fast-paced, cartoonish action movies like *Batman* [1989] and its proliferating sequels). This knowledge is cumulative; it rewards fans who are faithful to the show and who can therefore keep up with the twists in the plot. This time pressure (both within and across episodes) is frequently emphasized in the stories themselves, where it is usually linked to the kind of self-discipline that is essential for mastering martial arts and that the Rangers' chubby high school antagonist can never achieve.

Like their Greek precursors, both sets of superheroes also combine the twin powers of shape-shifting and knowledge. For the Rangers, their superior knowledge is displayed not only in the action sequences but also in the classroom, where it distinguishes them from the stupid, cowardly bullies who try to foil them. For the Turtles, it is mainly a knowledge of martial arts and the self-discipline that goes with it—the same lessons preached in *The Karate Kid* films. But Donatello is also singled out as the one who is a whiz at science and masterminds many of their most ingenious technological solutions.

Yet for all their know-how, in contrast to classical gods like Proteus and Morpheus, these postmodern superheroes have a fairly limited repertoire of transformations, which are restricted merely to size, fighting skills, and physical power. This limitation is not seen as a problem, since the vital issue is clearly empowerment and since these transformers achieve diversity in other ways. Like the conflict between individualism and bonding, there are many contradictions that emerge around this issue of diversity. In the case of the Turtles, who have a multinational identity despite their Italian names and Japanese master, they all speak like white California teens and are exclusively male. The only female in sight is April O'Neill, the feisty Irish American reporter who plays Lois Lane to their Superman.

In the case of the Power Rangers, despite an earnest attempt to diversify their membership (especially in contrast to the original Japanese series, where girls were not full-fledged members and where all Rangers had the same ethnicity), the early color coding in the American series unfortunately tended to reinforce old racial and gender stereotypes: Zack, the only African American male, was the black Ranger; Kimberly, a white

female, predictably pink; and Trini, an Asian American female, coded yellow. As if that were not sufficiently problematic, in the 1994 season (shortly before the Christmas shopping rush), Tommy (formerly the Green Ranger, who had originally been sent by Rita Repulsa to spy on the real Rangers but later underwent a moral conversion) was strategically metamorphosed into a White Ranger, who immediately became not only the most powerful and virtuous of the Rangers but also the new leader of this formerly egalitarian group. Not surprisingly, his action figure and other paraphernalia quickly sold out in the stores, sending droves of parents into a desperate quest for this super-desirable white hero and giving new meaning to the term "white Christmas." According to Ann Knapp, programming director for Fox's Children's Network, this change was motivated by the character's virtue ("You could look at it as Tommy being rewarded for being such a good student and working so hard on his martial arts"), yet cynics claimed, "it's because Saban Entertainment . . . ran out of Green Ranger footage from the cheap action sequences bought for the show from Japan" and "it also has to do with product turnover."²¹ Far more disturbing were the racist implications, for this transformation clearly put the white man's power back on top; yet it simultaneously exposed the constructedness of "whiteness" as a category. Unfortunately, in both the Rangers and Turtles series, the only diversity that ultimately counts is the ability to move as a successful commodity across different platforms and media. For in these myths, despite all the moralistic rhetoric about fighting to save the world, the mastery of marketing proves to be more important than the mastery of martial arts or justice.

As the prime spokesman for justice, both teenage bands have an adult guru with godlike powers whose body is restricted in form. Like the blind prophet Tiresias, their special knowledge and verbal mastery are linked with a physical handicap: Zordon is a talking head without a body, and Splinter is a giant talking rat. Not only are their static corporeal forms radically different from those of their supple young protégés, but these gurus are incapable of the fluid physical transformations that are associated with young growing bodies. In contrast to the case of Tiresias, there is no fear within the fiction that these prophets might contaminate the minds of their listeners; rather, a nondiegetic fear is raised (by parents, teachers, and other children's advocates) concerning the minds of young television spectators, which might be corrupted by the violent behavior of these transformers and by their crass commodification of growth.

The primary difference between the myths of the Turtles and Rangers

is the choice of transformational trope, mutation versus morphing. Without dismissing the distinction between these species as specious, I would reject Frye's normative contrast that elevates metamorphosis to the status of genius while ranking mutations with lowly minor talents. Whereas mutation looks backward to Darwin's nineteenth-century transformative trope of evolution, morphing looks forward to new media. Yet that does not mean that morphing is necessarily more progressive; for like Jim Carrey and like any new medium, morphing merely opens a new space onto which the old transformative myths and their power struggles can be projected and replayed.

Morphing is a high-tech mode of transformation that has more to do with empowerment than with appearance. In contrast to mutation, this mode of shape-shifting is based on technological rupture rather than being part of a "natural" process. It is active rather than passive: you do it to something or yourself rather than having it done to you. This distinction is linked to the shift in spectator position, from passive viewer (associated with movies and traditional television) to active player (demanded of video games and other interactive media, which most of these series emulate).

Thus the mutation of the Turtles is as passive as Gregor's metamorphosis into a cockroach and potentially just as grotesque. Their adventures (both in the TV series and the three movies) feature many other corporeal conversions that they themselves control—growing larger or smaller; impersonating Bogart, Cagney, and other notable stars; and going to masquerade balls where their turtle costumes are greatly admired. In fact, masquerade and voguing are fundamental to their myth, as is shown in the opening line of the original Laird and Eastman comic book, "Stupid Turtle costumes!" This parodic remark initiates a line of inquiry about the constructedness of the subject—a motif that runs throughout the myth and that is most resonant on the register of gender, particularly in the first TMNT movie.

Turtles are a species whose gender is not immediately apparent to most human observers. Unlike most superheroes, their gender specificity appears to depend totally on their costuming, weaponry, behavior, and names, which are bestowed on them by their patriarchal master, Splinter, and by the symbolic order on which his power is based. Within this myth, masculinity proves to be not biologically determined but culturally "constructed"—it is a role that can be chosen, learned, acquired, and performed even by aspiring members of so-called "inferior" species

such as rats, turtles, females, kiddies, and teens. To succeed in this quest for masculine empowerment, one must undergo one or more kinds of transformation: mutation (the Turtles), martial arts training (Splinter), masquerade (April in her jumpsuit), or consumption (kids who buy into the network). Although this conception of masculinity might offer more flexibility than biological determinism, it can hardly be consoling to feminists, for the only way for a female to be empowered is to become one of the boys. Still, it implies that the performance of gender is an active form of voluntary mutation.²²

The cultural meaning of morphing has similarly been expanded by the Power Rangers. Not only is it an electronic means of shape-shifting readily available in proliferating software programs for digital compositing that have recently made such imagery and myths seem *meta*-morphic, but it is also a successful marketing tactic for transforming a tacky Japanese sci-fi action series into the top-rated show in American children's television and a multimedia megahit in the global market. This form of cultural morphing compensates for the Japanese mastery over entertainment hardware (by companies like Sony), thereby demonstrating that the United States still has superior know-how with software! Moreover, the visual tackiness of the series (its artificial sets, corny dialogue, and crude dubbing) cultivates a precocious appreciation for kitsch and camp. Thus it implies that the more sophisticated work of meaning production is being performed by active spectators (who creatively adapt these texts to their own personal needs) rather than by crass producers (who merely recycle obsolete images from other cultures to make a quick buck). This dramatization of active spectatorship was also central to the success of *Peewee's Playhouse* and the Nickelodeon cable network, as well as to *Mystery Science Theater* and *Beavis and Butthead*. It can also be traced back to works in earlier forms and eras, such as Woody Allen's clever movie *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966) and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

In the visual representations of the actual process of morphing, the disjunctive cutting accentuates the weapons and athletic moves of the Rangers, both of which disrupt the linear continuity of the story. Such disruptions facilitate the morphing of this action sequence into the adjacent commercials for Power Rangers hardware, which frequently use a similar visual style. These matching morphing sequences (in the series and the commercials) frequently feature a distinctive form of "power voguing" (young kids in superhero costumes striking macho poses and

skillfully brandishing weapons), which can easily be replicated in bedrooms and boulevards across America (as the boy on Larchmont vividly demonstrated).

Both in the series and in the commercials, morphing functions as a form of accelerated consumerist suture. You are liberated from your infantile dependency on a "bad" mother like Rita Repulsa by learning how to become a shape-shifter who can move as fluidly as your superprotean heroes from TV images, to plastic toys, to video games, to blockbuster movies. But to fully achieve this mode of interactive spectatorship, you must first acquire the Mighty Morphin' hardware—the gloves that make karate moves with sound effects, the projectors and motion detectors that transform your own room into a battleground, and your chosen weapon that enables you to put your own personal spin on the myth.

This process of consumerist morphing is not restricted to *Power Rangers*: you can also find it in commercials for Gushers Fruit Snacks, where faces undergo morphing and humans are turned into toons as in popular hybrid movies like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), *The Mask* (1994), and *Space Jam* (1996). It is also easily transferable to new super-heroes and fads on the horizon that always threaten our reigning transformers with the kind of extinction that Kafka's Gregor so eagerly sought.

No one can accurately predict exactly how long any particular fad will last (not even a so-called marketing genius like Haim Saban), but we do know that it *will* be replaced and that the pace of the substitutions will be partially driven by children's growing consumerist desires. Like the Turtles and Rangers, all toys belong to a transformative system of marketing that empowers kids through their ever-changing choices as consumers. Like Warhol's proverbial fifteen minutes of fame or Baskin Robbins's flavor of the month, stardom in the children's toy market is merely a temporary subject position based on frequent substitutions. Occasionally there is a major innovation like Mattel's razor-blade theory of marketing, which was transferred to the toy industry to launch Barbie; in this system, an inexpensive doll functions as hardware and her proliferating accessories as faster-selling software, to create a two-tiered product with varying rhythms of replacement that keep consumers constantly coming back for more. Although Barbie is a singular superstar in the toy industry whose coding is exclusively female and nonviolent and whose shape-shifting powers are more restricted than those of the Turtles or Rangers, she provides the primary transformative model for their commercial success; for on issues of

consumerism, they are merely another species of the same basic phenomenon. Yet whether we dismiss them as a minor mutation or celebrate them as a true meta-morphosis, these superheroes drive us back to mythic transformers that help us reshape ourselves as resilient players who (like Sony's Akio Morita) are ever responsive to the changing cultural moment.

Notes

1. For a perceptive essay on Transformers, see Susan Willis, "Gender as Commodity," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (fall 1987): 403–21.

2. As quoted by Mike Freeman in "Haim Saban: The 'Power' Is His," *Broadcasting and Cable* (20 December 1993): 30. Sounding like Akio Morita of Sony (in the epigraph), Saban put it this way: "We have this picture puzzle of various countries around the world, with each being able to generate a certain amount of money for certain products. And if we can make sense out of a production by mixing Korean and Luxembourgish investments that would cover the production costs, then the rest of the world is open for sales."

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Eric Schmuckler, "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," *Mediaweek* (18 April 1994): 31.

7. For elaborations on this connection, see Edward Rothstein, "Technology," *New York Times*, 1 April 1996, D3; and Heather Hendershot's video *Mighty Morphin' Censorship: Who's Watching Children's TV?* distributed by Paper Tiger Television.

8. Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 135.

9. Before turning to Greek and Roman mythology, I can't resist citing a couple of examples from Polynesia to demonstrate that the contemporary appropriation of traditional mythological transformers and the reinscription of their gender and sexuality is not restricted to the West. In her award-winning first novel, *Where We Once Belonged* (Auckland: Pasifika Press, 1996), Samoan writer Sia Figiel draws on her culture's traditional myths about the powerful god Pili the Lizard, whose "ability to metamorphosise . . . was the one and only gift given him by his father Tagaloaalagi [the creator]" (39). Like the Ninja Turtles, this reptilian transformer sustains his masculine powers through compulsive consumption, but on a cosmic (rather than a multinational) scale: "To maintain his strength, Pili ate stars, drank

oceans, ate planets . . . ate, ate, ate," (139–40). In Figiel's reinscription, her young female protagonist Alofa compares Pili with Aoale, the beautiful earth goddess after whom he lusted and whose seven brothers defeat him, transferring his transformative power to their sister. Alofa reads her own adulterous father through the myth of Pili and conversely the god through her father. By appropriating the myth, she challenges her patriarchal family and culture: "I heard the story of Aoalele for the first time when I was in the womb, and because of it I willed myself female" (145).

The gender mobility of the shape-shifter trope is also central to Vilsoni Here-niko's play *Fine Dancing* (1997), which features a moon goddess Hina, who is female in act 1, male in act 2, and androgynous in act 3, and who, like Morpheus, is capable of assuming the form of the dreamer's loved ones. Performing the gender liminality of the Tongan *fakaleiti* (or Samoan *fa'afafine*), a clowning figure who is traditional in many Pacific island cultures (including Hereniko's own homeland of Rotuma), Hina generates transformations of cultural identity not only in a runaway wife and her abusive husband but also in a drag queen who helps the goddess reveal the specific Polynesian inflection of these transformative tropes.

10. *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 75–76.

11. Although Tiresias's gender bending figures prominently in a modernist poem such as Eliot's "The Waste Land," which describes the seer as a blind old man with withered female breasts who has suffered the sexual tribulations of both genders, in most classical texts, it is represented merely as a means of acquiring his omniscience, which is the real source of his power. T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" (1992), in *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays (1909–1950)* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 43–44.

12. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene, in *Greek Tragedies*, vol. 1, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 122–23.

13. For example, his own unique condition of physical blindness and singular knowledge prefigures Oedipus's fate, a connection Tiresias makes explicit in his first encounter with the tragic hero: "You are a poor wretch to taunt me with the very insults which every one soon will heap upon yourself" (126). Similarly, in *The Bacchae* (c. 405 B.C.) by Euripides, Tiresias's masquerade as a bacchanalian reveler is cruelly mocked by the blasphemous king Pentheus. Not only does the old seer's masquerade evoke his own earlier incarnation as a woman, but it also prefigures the king's fatal cross-dressing, which leads to his brutal death at the hands of his own deluded mother and her band of enchanted bacchae, who see

through his drag but without recognizing his royal identity. In contrast to the mercurial masquerades that the bodies of the prophets and gods undergo, the tragic transformations of these royal figures are irreversible.

14. Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: George Braziller, 1971).

15. "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact. / One sees more devils than vast hell can hold: / That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic, / Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt. / The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling / Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven; / And as imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen / Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name." William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.11.7–17. Ironically, the very capacity for transformative imagination that enabled both Othello and Desdemona to love each other across great barriers of age, race, culture, and experience also makes him susceptible to Iago's corrosive conceits, which (unlike the playful spells in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) cannot be erased from the mind of the tragic hero. Iago's power as a villain lies precisely in his ability to poison the imagination of this proud ruler (as Tiresias did to Oedipus and Creon, but in this case with malicious intent). His conceits generate painful transformations—of Desdemona into a whore and Othello into her insane killer (just as Tiresias's words changed Oedipus's beloved wife into his incestuous mother and himself into a patricide, and Pentheus's mother into his killer).

16. William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), xxxvii.

17. *Ibid.*, xxxix.

18. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

19. Quoted by Schmuckler, 28.

20. Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), 12.

21. James Kaplan, "More Power," *TV Guide* (29 October–4 November 1994): 38.

22. For an elaboration of this issue, see chapter 4 in Kinder, *Playing with Power*.