TITLE:

AI as Mythmaker

SUBTITLE:

The Large Language Models' Impact on Screenwriting Through the Lens of the Monomyth

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PRESENTATION:

Hello, my name is José Luís Peixoto and I'm a professional screenwriter. I've spent the last few years intensively studying the art of screenwriting, and anyone who has studied the same subjects related to narrative should know that there are dozens of books on structure.

A quick online search for images of screenplay structures provides impressive results. There are long, narrow lines with squiggles. There's a circular graph. There's a snail shape. There's a triangle. I think there's a parallelogram. And if there isn't a trapezoid, someone will make one.

They were all created to help future screenwriters learn how to structure a screenplay. The problem is that they're all based on the wrong premise. Structuring is not an action. Structure is a result, an end.

It's a pattern that we find as a symptom of a complex narrative. These pre-made structures were created by academics, simply by analysing the similar patterns between different stories. But today, there is a more efficient methodology for analysing these patterns: through artificial intelligence.

There is currently a vast academic discourse on why AI will never be able to replace human creativity. However, it is important to note that it is not our creativity that is being threatened by AI. It's our professional careers. If much creative work, at least in commercial industries, is already limited by familiar and repetitive patterns, it's important to consider that AI could be a more efficient pattern-finding mechanism than the human brain.

To better understand the progress of AI, I'd like to give you a bit of context about the emergence of large language models. These models, such as GPT-4, have emerged recently and aim to replicate human-like linguistic capabilities. They can give narrative cues, write scenes and generate dialogue adapted to specific characters. Their refinement has been facilitated by increasingly advanced computing power and the vast amount of data available online.

OpenAI's GPT-4, known as the latest version of Chat GPT, belongs to the "Transformer" family of language models. The "Transformer" framework uses attention mechanisms to focus on different parts of a text and generate a coherent text, taking into account the relationship between words in a sequence. Basically, GPT-4 analyses patterns.

Although AI is promising for the rapid production of screenplays and the generation of ideas, it still has limitations. The screenplays created by AI often lack the emotional depth and complexity that experienced human writers develop over the years.

In an article for The New Yorker, writer Ted Chiang compared GPT Chat to a blurry JPEG of all the text on the Internet, emphasising that although language models can mimic human text, they can only do so as approximations. It's important to emphasise, however, that the technology is still at an early stage and that, when combined with human intervention, it is already capable of producing impressive results.

Could AI generate art in a creative or original way? The concept of originality is usually associated with something that is not derivative, imitative or secondary. And it's true that great language models draw on a wide variety of data sources, such as web pages, books, research articles, arguments and even social conversations.

But instead of speculating on whether AI is original or not, it's imperative to engage in an open discourse and check whether these qualities are even valued in a professional context. For example, various sectors of the arts prioritise originality differently, often embracing adaptation, influence and reinvention of existing sources.

As the subtitle of this paper makes clear, my aim is to discuss the impact of large language models on screenwriting. To better illustrate this impact, I propose to focus on a specific comparison: Artificial Intelligence as a myth maker.

With this comparison, I don't mean to suggest that a great language model is, by definition, a true myth maker. Instead, I suggest that the way AI generates content is very similar to the myth making processes observed throughout history.

Myths have always served several purposes:
- to explain mysterious phenomena;
- mould social norms;
- offer moral guidance;
- to provide entertainment.

In Ancient Greece, for example, myths were used to explain natural disasters, with divine punishment being the common justification for floods.

It is interesting to note that the Greek legend of Deucalion, a well-known flood myth, has some similarities with other flood myths from other cultures. Academics such as Stephanie West even suggest that the Epic of Gilgamesh, which was created in an earlier period, was the source of the myth of Deucalion. We can also look at the stories of Noah's Ark in the Judeo-Christian tradition and

Manu's Ark in the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions. The striking similarities in all of them indicate the role that the repetition of stories plays in the myth-making process.

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung proposed that certain mythological structures, rooted in our collective consciousness, resonate in different societies. And over time, these ideas repeated in mythology have been adapted to the modern process of creating stories.

In the 12th century, Layamon wrote the epic poem Brut, the first work in English to refer to the mythology surrounding Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In fact, the poem is a re-adaptation of other literary works from different languages, including that of the Norman poet Wace and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, which was influenced by the 2nd century work of Apuleius, who in turn was influenced by Plato's pneumatology.

It is possible to argue that Layamon can be considered a myth maker, in the sense that he reinforced the myth of King Arthur to a wider audience. However, his knowledge was not entirely intuitive. He was influenced by literature and cross-cultural exposure.

Throughout history, there have always been existing texts that have been reimagined as new stories to adapt to changing cultural contexts. For example, Shakespeare was inspired by the works of Montaigne and Plutarch to create King Lear, adapting Greek and Roman tragedies to English royalty. Screenwriters also often turn to existing stories for inspiration. Sergio Leone transformed Kurosawa's samurai tale Yojimbo into the iconic western A Fistful of Dollars.

The same archetypes and themes present in mythology, the same ideas and images, served as the basis for the creation of stories as we know them today and, to this day, continue to captivate audiences because of their familiarity.

Now, I ask you to imagine the following: *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*

With this, I may be vaguely describing the story of The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Dune or even Barbie. This universal phrase was written by Joseph Campbell in his book The Hero with a Thousand Faces, where he emphasises the similarities found in the mythologies of various cultures, and establishes a kind of common structure, the monomyth.

The dissemination of the monomyth and its interpretation by other academics have turned it into a template on which writers can now build. The monomyth has evolved from a tool for comparing existing mythologies into a way of structuring stories from the ground up. And this practice has become highly standardised in the industry.

When Arthur C. Clarke found himself stuck writing 2001: A Space Odyssey, Stanley Kubrick gave him Campbell's book to help him. George Lucas has said more than once that he would never have finished Star Wars if he hadn't read it. And George Miller has also stated that the book had a huge influence on Mad Max.

Christopher Vogler, a Hollywood film producer and writer, wrote a document for Disney about using The Hero with a Thousand Faces as a guide for screenwriters. This document influenced the creation of films such as Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin and The Lion King. Vogler later expanded the document and published it as the book The Writer's Journey, which became the inspiration for a series of successful Hollywood films and is believed to have been used in the development of the Matrix series.

There are many studios, film schools, franchises or writing rooms that use, teach or at least make reference to Campbell's work. And the reason creatives read Campbell is because he is one of the best pattern recognisers our species has ever known, and because he has applied this ability in a way that has rarely been equalled. At least, until now.

Several innovations of the past have systematically challenged our ethical notions about content creation, as the photographic revolution and the Gutenberg press demonstrate. And just as happened

in those historic cases, our society may initially have control over the use and scope of Artificial Intelligence.

For now, the great language models are seen as tools that can help anyone identify patterns, regardless of their creativity or originality. Even so, the growing use of AI could gain what Thomas P. Hughes called "technological momentum" — the progressive integration of artificial intelligence into professional industries, as a deterministic force that will end up moulding its own trajectory.

In the past, pattern-seeking skills were reserved for specialists, such as mythologists and screenwriters, who became masters at creating or analysing narratives. But just recently, members of the Writers Guild of America went on strike, and one of their concerns was that producers could now use these skills on their own to achieve the desired results more quickly, thus reducing the screenwriter's role in the process.

Of course, compared to AI, humans are known for their instinctive thinking. However, an in-depth analysis reveals that many of the commercial works currently produced by the film and television industry are not the result of instinctive thinking, but rather adaptations, sequels or repetitions of existing material.

To illustrate this point, let's consider the five films at the top of last year's worldwide box office chart:
- Barbie was based on the Mattel toy range
- Super Mario Bros was based on the Nintendo video game franchise
- Oppenheimer was based on a biographical book about the historical figure
- Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 3 was a sequel, based on the group of Marvel comic book characters
- And finally, Fast X was the tenth sequel in the Fast & Furious franchise

Of these five, Barbie and Oppenheimer were particularly acclaimed as innovative, since the authorial vision of their creators was evident. It's important to note, however, that Barbie's script remains very faithful to the mythological hero's journey, while Oppenheimer's is based on a book entitled American Prometheus, which draws great parallels between Oppenheimer's life and the myth of Prometheus.

It's clear that both Greta Gerwig and Christopher Nolan deserve their own merits, as their styles and voices played a significant role in the success of these films. But it's important to remember that even in them, there are clear signs of the patterns we've inherited from the past. The question therefore arises as to whether a studio or production company is now able to use AI to artificially emulate the same parameters to create results that look just as innovative.

The WGA has managed to avoid this phenomenon by establishing regulations with American studios, which define that artificial intelligence cannot be considered an author, and that a human being must always be credited as the main writer of a script. It's unfortunate that other countries, like ours, don't have such a solid regulatory system to protect their own creative workers from similar practices. And these become particularly pertinent given our lack of financial security.

To conclude, asking AI to generate content that follows the standards universally demanded by commercial industries is now more accessible than ever, and the capabilities of language models are constantly growing.

With this communication, I don't mean to praise the capabilities of AI. In fact, I would say that AI only does what it is asked to do. It's a tool, if we choose to see it as such. It exists when it is used and does not work instinctively. Rather, I want to raise awareness of the potential consequences of the unregulated use of AI by humans.

As we move through such a transformative era, let's remember that the stories we tell and the way we tell them make up the very fabric of a collective consciousness. Unfortunately, those who endeavour to show originality and creativity when telling stories may find their careers jeopardised by mere digital illiteracy. Protecting the human creators behind these stories is not just a matter of economic necessity, but an act of preserving the essence of what makes us uniquely human.