

Welcome to the cult of love: Founded in the ancient empires, it has hacked into the digital age.

From the existential voids of our ancestors' minds emerged the Greek myth of soulmates. Once, humans were omnipotent, divine creatures with a single head with two faces, four arms and four legs. There were three sexes: Men were children of the Sun; women were children of the Earth; and androgynous descendants of the Moon were born out of the merging of opposites. Wielding a divine power, they became a threat to the god Zeus, who, terrified, cut them in half and banished them to live incomplete, in despair.

The story of soulmates originates in Plato's *The Symposium*. "The intense yearning which lovers have toward each other does not appear to be the desire for sexual intercourse, but for something else which the soul of each desire and cannot tell, and of which he or she has only a dark and doubtful presentiment," Plato writes. Though the tale might sound borderline ridiculous in today's world of ego-cult and individualization/alienation, it touches on something strangely familiar. A black hole in the middle of our core that we'd do everything to exorcise. As it's impossible, we try to fill it with the gods of culture, religion and substances. Since none of them seem to satisfy the void inside, we might as well look into the last resort of the illogical and examine the history of soulmates and trace their digital echoes in our age.

While the Greek myth is one of the most picturesque of the stories, it resonates in the beliefs of many cultures before and after. "Bashert" is the Yiddish word for destiny, with "basherter/basherter" designating "the fated one," as in a predestined partner or soulmate. The Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, treats husband and wife as "plag nishmasa," which means half-souls, split at the beginning of creation and reunited in holy matrimony. The notion of a soulmate is usually tied to the romantic connection in both its physical and spiritual aspects, though that's not always the case. In an ancient Celtic tradition, still popular in many spiritual Irish practices, there's a concept of Anam Chara. It's Gaelic for "soul friend," with Anam meaning soul and Chara meaning friend. Anam Chara is a mentor and spiritual guide, with an emphasis on companionship. This relationship was destined to be deeper than just the love-oriented one and often as the part of a human soul that can move outside of the body in an animal or, less commonly, a fate, traveling ahead of their owner. Chris Weitz's *The Golden Compass* loosely borrows from the Nordic, assigning a Daemon, or animal-shaped part of the soul to each of the characters.

Beyond the human and animal realm, the soulmate concept applied to the gods, who, quite uniquely, when reuniting didn't merge into one entity, but linked and harnessed the power of two souls. An example of that pairing is the sibling gods Shu and Tefnut, representing the two principles of existence, preservation and change. The idea of divine couples completing each other as soulmates and opposites goes way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Though that couple is not a perfect depiction of a soulmate relationship because of the often misogynistic and patriarchal portrayal of Eve's place in the relationship. That we find in Māori mythology, indigenous to New Zealand. Their origin story starts with Rangī, the Sky Father, and Papa, the Earth Mother. Joined in an eternal hug, they birthed children in the darkness. The children longed for warmth, so they separated their parents to allow the light to come into the world. It's said that to this day, Rangī mourns the loss of his lover in rain and Papa sends her affection up as a mist. In Hinduism, a corresponding union was Ardhanareshvara, a half-male and half-female deity combined from the god Shiva and goddess Parvati. Wanting to experience never seems to be enough. Here, the ecstasy comes from combining the inner masculine and feminine within. Not the longing for two entities, but dimensions, to meet.

Despite the enlightened thought of Hinduism and other traditions about the dual nature of the human soul, modern humans were already too obsessed with the search for the other half in the material world to pay attention. The quest reached its peak once again in Romanticism. In his early writing days, Goethe, a temporary victim of the love theories, had recurring headaches on opposite sides, in place of the original conjoining.

Today, we find ourselves in a strange place talking about soulmates. An idea rooted in the collective unconscious since early days comes into play with the re-examples in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, an anime where biblical-like angels try to destroy the Earth. The series closely examines the psyche of each character and their means to cope with loneliness, a feeling that plays the sweet blues of solitude throughout and their means to cope with loneliness, that to exist as a person is to be separate. It portrays the ways of dealing with the urge to return to the eternal womb through love, sex and friendships. None of them ends in success, but questions the possibility of the coexistence of individuality and a complete union with the other.

Luckily, the cold-hearted dimension of *Evangelion* is not the only one worth visiting. Michel Gondry's film "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" subscribes to the soulmates theory. It paints a picture where even after purging memories of one's partner,

destiny-bound lovers meet again and fate reignites the flame. A time-travel anime, 'Steins;Gate', follows a similar path. A pair of main characters have an interdimensional soulmate/love connection no matter what version of reality they end up in. That kind of transcendent link is also the core of the film, 'I, Origins', asking questions about reincarnation and the possibility of regaining memories of past lives. The storyline's reply is affirmative. A special enough soul connection goes beyond the limitations of mere physicality.

Circling back to the material realm, an endearing account of the soulmate-like love connection is Richard Linklater's 'Before' trilogy. After meeting on a train, Jesse and Céline spend a beautiful night together, full of sparkling conversation, exploring nuances of post-modern affection. In a sequel, the couple reunites nine years after the original meeting, realizing that the old fire still shines strong. The final part shows their relationship through the most down-to-earth and imperfect lenses: Real ones.

In all its variations and mysteries, the concept of the soulmate is a difficult one to capture in any work of culture. Each of the examples carries a piece of the theory within it, but none can capture the essence of something as ethereal, especially if we project it onto something external. History proves that this method will never satisfy our longing for oneness. Following on the thread of Plato's double-humans and the merging of Shiva and Parvati, Carl Jung indirectly internalized the idealized version of the soulmates, calling them anima, the inner figure of a woman held by a man, and animus, the figure of a man at work in a woman's psyche. Both serve as a guide of the soul, mediating between the unconscious and conscious mind. According to Jung, our life's great mission is the completion of the process of individuation in which we accept the anima/animus. The problem appears when instead of sacrificing ourselves to the challenging inner work, we project the archetype onto another person, 'the Magical Other,' as a Jungian analyst, James Hollis, named them, the one person who would be a key to our inner salvation. Sounds like Plato's soulmate, without the non-binary as a gender option.

Today, science contraindicates the existence of soulmates, psychology rightly advises us to work on ourselves instead of projecting. There's no need to create myths to sell the traditions to the new generation as knowledge now travels through our cybersoap operas. Still, there's the stench of rotting nostalgia that won't leave the room, on both sides of the screen. Perhaps, the more we start to analyze and ruthlessly take soulmates apart, the more hope for love we lose along the way. After yet another existential jump into the known-unknown, we might quietly yearn for it. It is like holding onto a blade with one hand, but what if the blade-drifter? We can hold on harder to a warm hand than a cold blade.

In 2007, Libb Thims proposed the idea of free energy matching, based on the chemical compatibility of humans. In their fantasy version of the future, you'd be able to pick your mate on the reaction potential after comparing human free energy tables. It's supposed to save us the trouble of finding the ideal match. Now, fifteen years later, the only deconstructed echo of the concept resounds in the dystopian reality of *Black Mirror*. In the 'Hang The DJ' episode, we see their dark take on an elaborate Tinder-like app, using the simulation of the 'digital clones' of the users.

Ever since the fascination with AI started, it was obvious that the soul-connection territory wouldn't stay unconquered. In Spike Jonze's *Her*, the subject falls for an AI operating system, Samantha, despite the obvious obstacles of the form, body/code, and matter of sci-fi, the quest for a soulmate is often carried out on the digital realm. Social media became the most popular home for our crafted, thorough filters and careful selection of selfies figure for the made-up image that could never live up to expectations. In an echo of the old days, we shift focus onto the idols: the celebrities and artists. While a key to their allure before was the mystery, today, because of social media content, we can connect through parasocial relationships, a one-sided connection where the other person is unaware of our existence.

From ancient Greece to today's digital realities, there's an un-derlining theme. In the darkest hours, in the deepest shadow-self, we all desire "the complete destruction of the self, abolishing the boundaries that separate her from the beloved," as Simone de Beauvoir once said about women's devotion. Now we must apply it above and despite the con of night, we still dream of the complex of the lost archetypal twin in the back of our minds, in the dead might be painful to twist our stubborn minds in that direction, but necessary. Internally united, we can be our most skillful savior and stand a chance against the faceless void. But it's a space where all that's reason withers. That's why, in the end, the defense mechanisms against that have to be illogical. That's the most humane method of them all. Maybe the ultimate quest in life is to search for the illogical. For broken patterns, bugs in the system, and cracks in the walls. Maybe in those confined spaces in between, we can squeeze ourselves. Even if just for a minute before they start to break down or throw us out. Maybe like that, it'll be possible to make a real connection with the abyss and every time it comes, welcome it with a smile, like a long-lost quirky cousin. If not, maybe it's possible to find other illogical people to build a shelter from the void with. Soulmates.

Artworks

Photos

Jon Burgerman
All images courtesy of the artist
WAOV Gallery