

Module: RESEARCH IN PRACTICE - ADAD5004

Key Words: MYTH HUMAN PALIMPSEST

Name: Reuben Harris

Lecturer: Louise Burston

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Key thinkers/artists: **Chris Burden/David Medalla, Sir Peter Paul Rubens, Pablo Picasso**

Context

In this proposal I will explore the notion of the survival of mythology through art and this will be through my three keywords: Myth, Human and Palimpsest. In my practice I am very interested in the ever increasing popularity of myth, especially in the tattoo industry – which is an industry I would very much like to work in. These key words are linked to key artists as follows – Myth (Pablo Picasso), HUMAN (Rubens) and PALIMPSEST which links to contemporary artists (Chris Burden and David Medalla).

MYTH

Myths can be described as fictional, romantic, often tragic tales from ancient times depicting a fantasy world. According to art historian James Cahill, **‘Mythology is so prevalent because it resonates across time, embodying new forms while keeping a recognisable base. Like art, it has the capacity to compress past and present’** (2021) This is a key statement because art, since the times of the Ancient Greeks, has borrowed from and echoed myths, taking from them whichever themes and characters are suitable to the present time. In this way, art has kept myths alive, and it is predominantly the Greek myths which have survived time. Every age since has taken the stories of Pandora, Icarus and Perseus among others and recreated their own version, as Camus states **‘Myths have no life of their own. They must wait for us to give them body’**. (Camus, 1995)

The myths of Ancient Greece began with the oral tradition of story telling and then approximately 1200 BC poets began to sing of the familiar Gods that we know – Zeus, Poseidon, Athena – they were synonymous with adventure, supernatural powers and yet human in other respects. They felt the same feelings and encountered similar problems. They changed however, with each generation, even after writing was introduced. The Romans for example accepted the art and poetry of the Ancient Greeks and then used the Greek Gods as deities in their own culture. However, they emphasised less the emotion and life stories of these heroes, and more the powers and authority of these Gods. These were worshipped much like the Roman leaders and portraits of leaders and gods were often hung together. It was the Roman poet Ovid and his *Metamorphosis* (Ovid and Martin, 1998) which then gave the Ancient myths a form which would be carried through hundreds of years into the future. Surprisingly with the advent of Christianity in Europe, myths managed to survive, with some of the gods and creatures linked to Christian concepts – so satyrs

with demons or devils, and Gods to saints. In addition to this the myths were used as explanations for phenomena like thunder or storms. Also signs of the zodiac. The mythical references were a natural part of medieval life. We learn that

‘Greco-Roman divinities, events from the Trojan War, and the feats of Hercules, Alexander, and Julius Caesar appeared not only in illustrated manuscripts, but also in tapestries, decorative sculpture, and small objects exchanged as gifts among aristocrats’ (2021)

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries brought the Renaissance with them and this focus on man and individual power lent itself to the mythical gods, so ‘Heracles, for example, was invoked not only to exemplify virtue but also the more worldly qualities of individual fame and human achievement’



Heracles right fighting a lion.

Italy (1376)

HUMAN

Renaissance poets and artists were very interested in searching Ancient Cultures for inspiration – especially in Rome. Ancient statues were uncovered from various sites and pieces missing were filled in. Specimens of the past were remodelled and corrected so that they became part of the Renaissance present. Great monarchs and leaders became synonymous with classical figures to emphasise their power and greatness. We know that the spirit of the renaissance was Humanism, which celebrated the human capabilities and by merging the humans with the mythological figures emphasised the potential of human beings.



Louis XIV as Apollo 1653

Pen, wash and gouache



Prometheus Bound - Peter Paul Rubens (1611-1618)

Oil on canvas

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) was another painter of the Renaissance who – primarily using Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' – produced many works of art which drew on ancient mythological stories.

'Rubens painted great numbers of scenes in which he showed with energy and brilliance his understanding of classical mythology. (Classical Mythology in Art, 2021)

Rubens was painting in the Baroque style and his works often drew on the most dramatic moments in the myth. But he saw the gods in those he lived alongside, especially his wife in later life, Helena, who he adored. She inspired such paintings as 'Venus and Adonis' and it is clear he used classical myths to explore the greatest human emotions and characteristics.

'Rubens often identified Helena with the goddess Venus, as in his glowing *Venus and Adonis* (c. 1635).'
(Peter Paul Rubens | Biography, Style, & Facts, 2021)

In the eighteenth century there was a move away from Ovid and the roman interpretations of mythology and with the discovery of several Greek temples in archaeological advances, art was informed by what they believed to be the perfection of Greek art. In 1764 an artist Johann Winckelmann studied Greek art and produced volumes of work which would prove influential to art historians for centuries to come.

'Winckelmann proclaimed 'the superior humanity of the Greeks' and at this time Greek mythological art continued to inspire the goals and aspirations of human ambition.' (2021)



Perseus and Andromeda (1735 – 1740) - Charles Andre van Loo

Oil on Canvas

PALIMPSEST

This brings us to the age of Romanticism and the eighteenth and nineteenth century artists, who were seen to interpret the myths in a more personal much more creative way when exploring what it is to be human. The Romantic artists wanted to capture a spirit, an inner state more than perfect physical representations of the mythological figures. They would **'piece together visual clues and supply their own imaginative connections'** (2021)



Prosperine, 1874

Oil Paint on Canvas

and this is what Rossetti is doing in a painting like 'Proserpine'. He uses the original source – the myth of Proserpine, Empress of Hades – but uses a live model, his muse Jane Morris, to explore the nineteenth century Proserpine. Rossetti saw Proserpine in Jane herself, married to a cold husband, William Morris, and longing to be released from a hell,

'this image of Proserpine summed up Rossetti's view of Jane Morris as a goddess bound to a husband from whom she was only occasionally released to joy and light.' (Jargalsaikhan, Jargalsaikhan, Stanska and Parla, 2021)

The goddess was the first layer of a palimpsest, revisited by Romantic artists, parts rubbed away and redrawn into their contemporary world. Mythological art begins draws on so many ages of interpretation and artistic endeavours, the art becomes a palimpsest. Layers upon layers of historical interpretations of myths, reinvented and reimagined to have meaning for more modern times.

But in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, these layers were themselves erased to make way for newer, more creative artworks based on the ancient worlds and their myths. These centuries were full of their own turmoil and challenges, and the old myths were revisited once more. What follows are some of the most extraordinary revisitations to the age old myths we are told as children, by **'contemporary artists who continue to address and reinterpret mythological references in their works.'** (The Modern Myth: Drawing Mythologies in Modern Times | MoMA, 2021)

Picasso's 'Minotaur' in 1933 seemed to be exploring the concept of the 'beast within', the uncontrollable nature of lust perhaps. Then Salvador Dali's 'Metamorphosis of Narcissus' 1937 was suggesting the paranoia of narcissism with his concept of doubles. They were exploring twentieth century concerns using the original characters of myth.

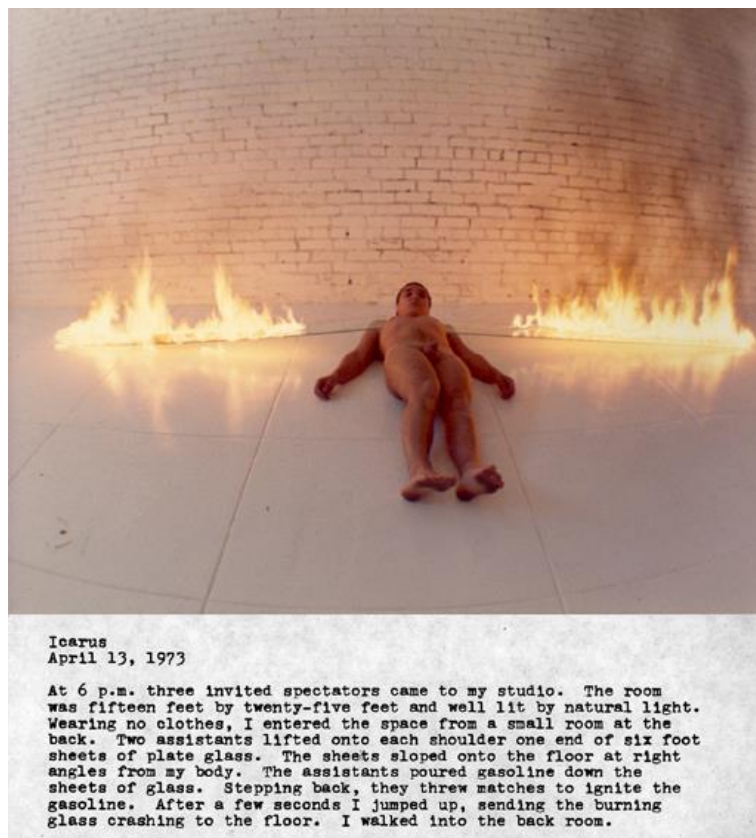


Minotaur in Love with a Female Centaur, Picasso 1933



Metamorphosis of Narcissus, 1937.

American Chris Burden is one artist who has exhibited his creations in the form of performance art and his interpretation of Icarus is visually stunning,



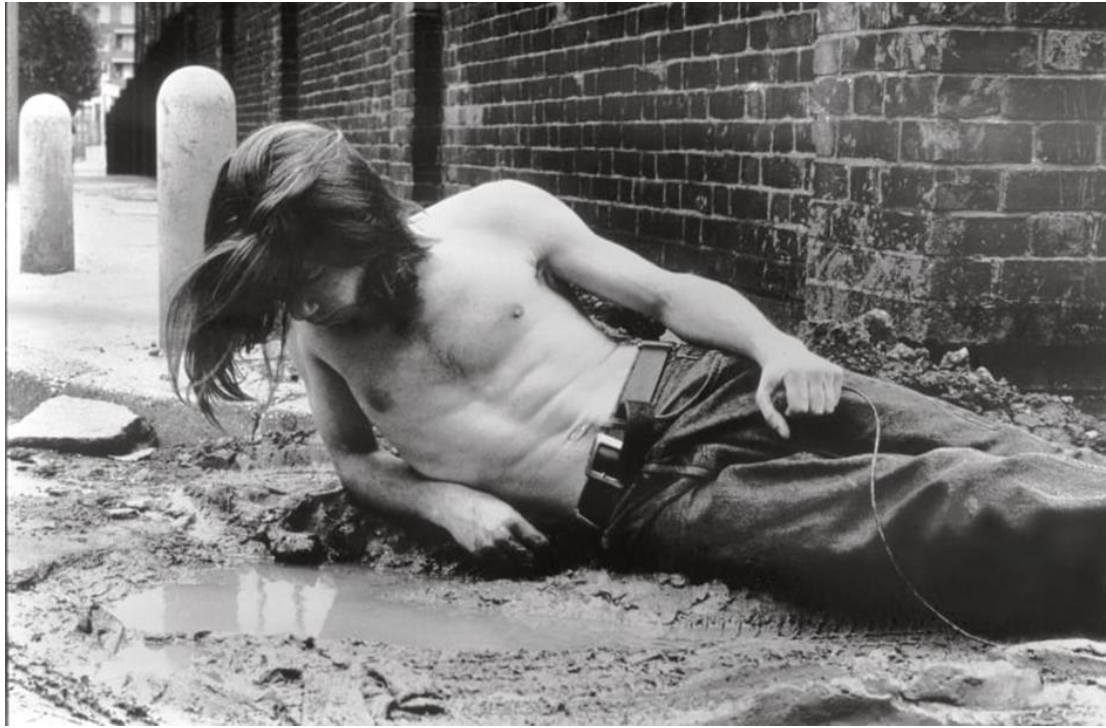
‘When Los Angeles artist [Chris Burden](#) (1946–2015) performed *Icarus*, assistants lifted on to each of his shoulders the end of a six-foot sheet of glass, with each sheet sloping to the floor at right angles to his torso. After spilling gasoline over the glass, the assistants set it alight. Within a few seconds, Burden jumped up, so that the burning glass crashed to the floor. Burden recorded his recreation of the moment’ (Editors, 2021)

David Medalla too, in his ***Cosmic Pandora Micro-Box, 2010*** created a visual street display which fascinated passers by in his attempt to bring his own concerns into a box and present them to mankind.

‘Presented with their container, an ordinary cardboard box, the objects act like relics, stand-ins for the artist’s body as he negotiates unfamiliar territory. By referencing Pandora in the title of his piece, Medalla creates a link with the mythological box (or urn) from which the hapless woman released all the evils of the world. Here, though, the objects stand for the unexpected beauty of ordinary things, a whimsical and celebratory twist on the divine punishment of the gods.’ (Editors, 2021)



Cosmic Pandora Micro-Box, 2010



"Narcissus" (1990) by Mat Collishaw

Twentieth and twenty first century artists have been likely to use the myths to explore some of the psychological issues of our times, with the use of symbolism to make links with what perplexes us the most. We use the myths in art to explore our inner selves more than to illustrate a story. The focus of art is often a character like Icarus, who cannot help but over-reach, so perhaps this is a link to an ambitious and grasping society. Or Narcissus too, the ideal representative of the self-absorbed antics of a media focused capitalist society like the one we live in today. Particularly thought-provoking is "Self-Portrait as Achilles" (2015) by Andrea Mary Marshal, which captures the concept of vulnerability, that we all have a weak spot available to everyone who wants to lash out. In a world of cyber bullying and trolling, we have become targets for others like never before.



"Self-Portrait as Achilles" (2015) by Andrea Mary Marshal

The idea of artistic works as being a PALIMPSEST is something neatly displayed in a volume of artwork published by PHAIDON editors, called 'Flying Too Close to the Sun'. (Flying too close to the sun, 2018)

Versions of mythological characters and references in the world of art are placed alongside each other for the reader to compare, and can be a fascinating insight into how artists have explored the myths during each era in history.



'Flying Too Close to the Sun' – published by Phaidon in 2018

Artists in the current climate of the twenty first century are producing art in a digital format, and an interesting collection is by artist Howard Hardiman based on the Isle of Wight, who claims that myths in art have been **'told and retold to different audiences in different ways ever since. You can use the changes**

in the stories as a way of mapping movement of people, but also of beliefs and values.' (Howard Hardiman | Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies | Open University, 2021)

This is an interesting comment which suggests that the way myths are interpreted in art will tell us so much more about the society that produced them than the original tale.



Hardiman's 'Medusa' (2015). Giclée print 59cm x 84cm



Hardiman's 'Artemis' (2015). Giclée print, 60 x 85cm

This essay has explored the **way that the world of art has kept the ancient myths alive through thousands of years**. They are very often visualised by artists and, in the twenty first century, perhaps the most common canvas for a detailed depiction of mythological figures and tales is the human skin. Tattooists are asked to draw these heroic figures daily in our tattoo obsessed culture, which is one of the reasons I wanted to trace the history of mythology in art, as tattooing is a career of great interest to me. Currently one of the most popular styles for Greek mythological figures is the 3D tattoo, which really does appear to bring the myths to life.



3D Tattoo of Zeus

Focusing on mythology in art for this unit has led to several possibilities for next year's dissertation but perhaps it needs to be more specific next year. It would be interesting to use the figure of the **MINOTAUR** next year as my central mythological character, and a dissertation could trace how he has been perceived through art over the ages. He is a powerful and well-known figure from childhood and I am sure there are many forms to explore. There are paintings of the Minotaur ranging from depictions on ancient pottery to paintings by William Blake, Picasso of course – and even a much more modern twist in a piece where the minotaur has its gender changed in 'Minotaur with Skull' (2015) Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley, a

work combining drawing, animation and live performance. It would be fascinating to explore the storybook illustrations of this frightening beast also, to explore how different eras have had different interpretations or have emphasised different characteristics of the minotaur.

Proposed question for Independent Project 'How has Visual Art kept Ancient Mythology Alive?'

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