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Introduction

Myths, legends, and folklore have been prominent in the process of creating artwork throughout history, although seemingly becoming less influential in contemporary art practices or art made after 1945 (Malik, K. 2021). In this essay, I will explore how mythology has influenced contemporary art practice as well as how it can be perceived, predominantly focusing on artwork but also including other media such as music and performance.

I will be using a semiotic approach to analyse a range of media that I feel is relevant to what I want to investigate. However, I will predominantly be looking into European pre-Christian mythology such as Norse, Greek, and Celtic, although other types of mythology will also come into this when exploring some artworks. By the end of this dissertation proposal, I will have formed the question I aim to explore further in my dissertation next year. I feel this topic is relevant as mythology was one of the earliest subjects that people made art about (Malik, K. 2021.), although initially with the purpose of worshipping gods, contemporary art influenced by mythology is more often made with the purpose of understanding or processing personal experiences and current events.

Semiotics is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2023) as *The study of signs and symbols, what they mean and how they are used*. The use of semiotics in the context of this essay would be most appropriate as mythology is a subject which depends highly on signs and symbols. It is also worth considering that understanding what an image may be communicating based on social, cultural, and historical contexts is a subconscious behaviour we all partake in, with this also expanding into written and audible forms of media too. Semiotics is primarily based on communication (Sign Salad, 2023) and allows the viewer to

interpret a range of signs and symbols based on their surrounding factors and the viewer's personal experiences, for example; a snake may symbolise evil and deceit in the Bible (Ritchie, L. 2021) however, in Greek Mythology they were often associated with the god of medicine, Asclepius, and represented eternity (The Collector, 2023).

The way I will be dissecting Mythology's influence on contemporary art practice and how it is perceived in this essay will be through a process of considering three key topics I feel are relevant to how I aim to explore this question. The first key topic I will discuss will be *surrealism* and how key artists such as Leonora Carrington explore their world through a myth-based lens, next I will go on to explore *social commentary*, as in past essays and research I have come to recognise that often artists will create metaphors for current events and social issues using mythology in their work, this section will go on to explore music and artwork such as Norwegian singer AURORA and her recent album *The Gods We Can Touch* (2022) as well as *Venus of the Rags* (1967, 1974) by Michelangelo Pistoletto. Finally, I will be exploring the work of Grayson Perry and his own invented theology to explore how mythology is used in art practice to understand and process *personal experiences*.

Surrealism



Figure 1: *Transference* By Leonora Carrington (1963)

It is known that Carrington was raised being told stories from Celtic mythology by her mother (Chadwick, W, P.75), this interest in mythology reflects in a large portion of the works she produced throughout her career, in particular, those reflecting on her childhood.

As stated in *Visions of the Occult* (2022), the title of the painting refers to a *psychoanalytic process in which the patient transfers emotional responses to past experiences onto their therapist*. (Jenkins, V. P.26).

Doctor Abraham Fortes, Carrington's Psychoanalyst, appears several times throughout the painting in different forms or situations, interacting with a variety of mythological creatures and figures. When looking at the painting the viewer can break it down into three sections, the left, the middle, and the right. The Left section consists of a wall adorned with carvings resembling figures from Egyptian myths, such as an ibis-headed figure known as Thoth, who served as the scribe of the underworld and would weigh the heart of the dead against a feather to discern whether or not the dead had lived a just life. In Greek myths, Thoth was combined with the Greek god Hermes to form Hermes Trismegistus, who is also

represented in the painting. (ToSalem. 2020). Doctor Fortes also appears at the bottom of this section wearing an orange robe on top of a fish in a pool.

The middle section of the painting is a Red-walled room in which is the most complete portrait of Doctor Fortes, who is now in a smaller space within the room, possibly behind a net. He is also holding a bat to his chest with his right hand and a whip in his left. Above this version of him is a blue bat and a spider-like figure. To the right of this space is a deer with candles on its antlers illuminating the space and surrounding a fish engulfing yet another version of Doctor Fortes, a variety of creatures observes the event alongside three other figures, which can be interpreted as three witches or the three fates, perhaps referring to the Moirai from Greek mythology:

Carrington also includes references to Zodiac symbols and the art of Ancient Egypt. These reflect her interest in myth, animals, and symbols. She often painted dream-like scenes with figures from literature, the Bible and Greek mythology. (Tate, Gallery label, June 2021)

Finally, the right section is divided from the middle by a second panel resembling the first section and shows the final representation of Doctor Fortes wearing orange again, sitting above a pink and orange figure with white hair and holding a green orb on a staff. Above them is Carrington's star sign, Aries.

The influence of mythology on surrealist artworks isn't restricted to Carrington alone, as this is common among other artists in the movement such as Andre Masson and Max Ernst too, both of whom also used mythological imagery to represent themselves or their experiences in the world (Takac, B. 2019). However, unlike other surrealists, Carrington didn't possess any interest in the works of Sigmund Freud (Chadwick, W. P.85) and so her work and the

imagery produced in her work is primarily based on personal experience, which is a subject that will be covered later on in this essay.

Social Commentary



Figure 2: *Venus of the Rags* By Michelangelo Pistoletto (1967/74)

The second key topic I will be addressing is *Social Commentary*, this is an area which has been expressed through the use of mythological imagery and metaphors in art practice for hundreds of years (Malik, K. 2021) although in contemporary practice the issues it addresses vary from its classical counterpart.

Initially constructed in 1967, Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto composed *Venus of the Rags* (Figure 2), consisting of found objects such as a statue of Venus, the Roman goddess of love, beauty, and desire that was cast from a version the artist found in a garden centre, with her back turned to the audience, and facing or being consumed by a mountain of second-hand clothes, resembling a landfill. The piece was updated twice in 1974 and 1997 when more clothes were added to the pile. The juxtaposition of the two components combines historical ideas and modern issues. While it was created with rags used to clean

Pistoletto's mirror paintings at first, the act of updating the piece later on with second-hand clothes forces the meaning of the piece to evolve past simply creating contrasts between materiality and comments on fast fashion and consumerism.

Fast fashion is responsible for 85% of all fabric that ends up in landfills annually, as well as 10% of emissions worldwide, with this expected to increase to 16% by 2030. (Maiti, R. 2022). Considering Venus as the Roman goddess of beauty, having her be consumed by the pile of discarded clothes and facing away from the audience signifies a sort of sacrifice to the qualities she represents, in a world damaged by mass consumerism and fast fashion there cannot be beauty.

Another way social commentary is expressed through a combination of mythology and art practice is often through music. Norwegian singer Aurora is widely known for her activism on a range of societal issues such as climate change, racism, LGBT+ rights and mental health. Her most recent album titled *The Gods We Can Touch* was created when considering religion alongside these issues (Aurora, 2022d) with most of the tracks on the album taking inspiration from a Greek god or Goddess that is associated with ideas and feelings surrounding the issues being addressed.

The most prominent examples on the album are 'Exhale Inhale' which addresses the Climate emergency and takes inspiration from the Gods Oizys and Thanatos (Aurora, 2022b) who represent death and anxiety, 'Giving into the Love' (Aurora, 2022d) and 'The Innocent' (Aurora, 2022c) which both address society's obsession with perfectionism and are inspired by Prometheus who was believed to have created the human race and Eros who was the god of love, and finally 'A Dangerous Thing' (Aurora, 2022a) which faces the topic of abusive

relationships, or abuse of power and is inspired by Peitho, the Goddess personifying persuasion.

When asked in an interview about her inspiration for writing the album Aurora stated that she wanted to understand why our image of god had changed so drastically since ancient times, why humans took the myths away from everything around us and made it less relatable:

(In ancient times) god was in everything, in the earth, where we walked, in the sun hitting our faces, in the rivers and waters that we even can drink and in our trees. In life here and around us. (...) It was in everything, But at one point in history humans decided to remove god from here and put it, or him or her, far away up in the clouds. Away from here, out of our touch and we made god way less approachable, less imperfect, less human with time throughout history, which I found fascinating. I wonder why we did that. (Aurora. 2022d).

This questioning in itself commentates on how religion and our ideas of god are perceived today, especially in how some people choose to live their lives by something that is often unattainable and drives an unhealthy obsession with perfectionism, which is explored through various songs on *The Gods We Can Touch* (2022). She also states how the Greeks had a god or goddess for everything, and this myriad of figures gave a better understanding of the world around them, she uses this idea to commentate through her music on current social issues.

Personal Experiences



Figure 6: *My Gods* By Grayson Perry (1994) Right



Figure 5: *My Gods* By Grayson Perry (1994) Front



Figure 3: *My Gods* By Grayson Perry (1994) Left



Figure 4: *My Gods* By Grayson Perry (1994) Back

The final key topic I will be discussing in this essay will be *personal experiences* as stated in the introduction, contemporary artworks featuring mythological iconography are more often used as a metaphor or a tool to express personal experiences (Malik, K. 2021) as explored in *Transference* (1963) by Leonora Carrington, previously discussed in this essay. Another strong example of this use of mythological symbolism can be observed in an autobiographical piece titled *My Gods* (1994) by Grayson Perry. Although the mythological

figures featured on the vase are of Perry's own creation, some influences on how they are presented are still rooted in ancient Greek myths.

As a familiar object in everyday life, the vase itself is only slightly bigger than a normal domestic vase and presents four unique Gods that Perry has designed to express and embody his personal experiences, allowing him to process them more deeply. This is also referred to in the title, emphasising that they are gods he created to understand them and his worldview.

Presented on the vase are two Goddesses; Doreen, the God of Cleanliness (Figure 4, Figure 5), and the second is an unnamed goddess who holds a strong resemblance to the Gorgon Medusa (Figure 3, Figure 6), commonly represented in Greek mythology. The two other gods represented are identified as Luigi, the God of quiet machismo (Figure 5, Figure 6), and Alan, the God of imagination (Figure 3, Figure 4), introducing a peaceful retreat from the violence that the other 3 Gods bring to the vase (Tate, 2023). Together, these four figures offer a unique and insightful glimpse into Perry's personal mythology and provide an intriguing window into his world and creative process.

Perry projects aspects of his parents onto made-up gods and goddesses while reflecting on his childhood experiences, this is reflected in the frightening and abusive nature of three of the four gods displayed on the vase and his relationship with his parents being reflected on thoroughly in other artworks and written media too. It should also be considered that this activity of creating a system of such characters has been an activity of Perry's since his early childhood (Jones, W). The earliest one was based on his teddy bear Alan Measles (now taking the form of Alan, The god of imagination), who ruled over an imaginary world Perry

had also created. As revealed in his biography “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl” he lived in this imaginary world to escape the turmoil that came with living with his stepfather;

Between the ages of four to fifteen, I gradually retreated further inwards and my internal world became increasingly important to me (...) Events were upsetting, terrifying much of the time. (Jones, W and Perry, G. P.66-67).

Aside from using personal mythology to process these events, the general idea of presenting them on a vase echoes ancient pottery found across a variety of cultures also illustrating gods and tragic tales (Figure 7). It was common practice for people to construct their understanding of the world based on the mythology they believed in and so these objects held the function of not only domestic use but also as vessels for communicating beliefs (Nelson Atkins Museum of Art. 2022). Through *My Gods* (1994) Perry communicates his understanding of the people and world around him as he knew it as a child.



Figure 7: Black-Figure Amphora (500 B.C)

Conclusion

From this research and consideration of three key topics, it is clear that pre-Christian mythology still holds an influence over how art is produced and perceived, as well as over how artists choose to express issues that they are concerned with, ranging from mental health, personal experiences, and global and societal issues. Going forward, with these topics in mind with the consideration of my dissertation, I feel it would be appropriate to further explore the topic of mythology alongside feminism and how gender can be expressed or the idea of exploring global and personal issues through the use of myth-based imagery, linking back to past interests in my research as well as my art practice.

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