

Tony I Stephens

2112655

BA Design Craft

ADAD5004 – Research in Practice

Tutor – Julia Lockheart

Word Count – 2587

KEYWORDS: MYTH, PLACE & CREATIVITY

The three words above have significant value to my practice, and I propose to look at their meanings with the view of collating information that will then lead to the formation of a question for my final years Independent Inquiry.

MYTH

The definition of Myth according to the Collins English Dictionary is a ‘tale with supernatural characters, usually of how the world and mankind began; untrue idea or explanation; imaginary person or object’ (Thomson, Mark, p181). The Thesaurus definition is broken down as ‘legend, story, fiction, saga fable, fairy story, folklore’ & ‘legend, folklore, tradition, lore’ (Thomson, Mark, p186). The Thesaurus definition is more interesting as it still shows the blurry line between fact and fiction that many myths entail the ‘reader’ to take on, but it roots the many world ‘myths’ firmly in the realm of humanity and culture. Looking at ‘The Dictionary of Critical Theory’, the definition goes much deeper, and involves Carl Jung, Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure “who observed that similar sounds recur in different languages, but have different meanings” (Buchanan, (2010). This point was of interest to me, as I am also looking at the Celtic Languages for clues and pointers, focusing on Cornish (1), Welsh (2) and Scottish Gaelic (3). Indeed, Saussure is correct in the fact the Gaelic for Myth is (1) “myth/ mythys” (cornishdictionary.co.uk), (2) “myth/ mythau” (geiriaduracademi.org), and (3) “miotas” (learngaelic.net) – so all three sound the same, however in this case their meanings are all similar too, being the same as that of the Collins Dictionary.

In “A Short History of Myth”, Karen Armstrong tells us that:

“Mythology speaks of another plane that exists alongside our own world, and that in some sense supports it. Belief in this invisible but more powerful reality, sometimes called the world of the gods, is a basic theme of mythology” (p.4)

The Australian Aborigines have a belief system known as the “Dreamtime or Dreaming”, and they have a creation myth that involves ‘The Rainbow Serpent’ (Fig 1), which is said to be “one of the longest uninterrupted mythological traditions in the world” (Wroth, David (2020)



(Fig. 1) Cave Painting at Rainbow Serpent Shelter, Mount Borradaile in Western Arnhem Land, Northern Australia. (DU Photography/Alamo Stock Photo, nd)

The giant serpent is said to have emerged from under the ground and created the mountains, hills, rivers and gully's by winding its way across the country. The many animals and humans are then said to have sprung from its body. The Rainbow Serpent is also associated with Water source's, and the Aboriginal people still have many rituals associated with watering holes and other sacred sites associated with The Rainbow Serpent. Certain things, such as

swimming or fishing, are banned at some sites for fear of offending the serpent, and incurring its wrath – which could be drought, flooding, or sickness.

As shown by the Aborigines use of Ritual – Myth and Ritual are intertwined. Joseph Campbell is quoted as saying that “A ritual is the enactment of a myth. And, by participating in the ritual, you are participating in the Myth” (Campbell (2005). The Aboriginal rituals involve singing to The Rainbow Serpent as they approach a watering hole, singing their intentions and letting the Serpent know they mean no harm. The use of song is important as “music sings to everyone – and every species” (Campbell, Don, p10). The use of song/sound also has another effect in that it connects us back to nature. When hearing or singing ancient song or sounds “parts of our body oscillate, cells lying dormant reawaken.” (Inserra, Laura, (2023). This ‘oscillation’ releases energy which heals and rebalances us and roots us to the place. So, in their rituals the Aboriginal people are not only honouring their own beliefs but also cementing their own connection to the land, and to the Myth.

Myths and their Rituals help us understand our place in the world and help us to find our place within it. The world is a chaotic and often bewildering place, so the power and enduring appeal of Myth as a tool to make sense of it all should never be underestimated.

PLACE

The Collins Dictionary defines Place as “a particular part of an area or space; particular town, building, position; seat or space; duty or right” (Thomson, p206). The thesaurus’s definition is far more convoluted affair. There are 8 noun uses listed, amongst which are “site, location, whereabouts, region, locale, standing, & dwelling”; as well as 5 verb usages of which the most interesting one is “identify, remember, recognise, put your finger on” (Thomson, p210). In Gaelic the word gets even more complicated, there being 23 different words for Place in

Cornish, more than 23 different words in Welsh, and at least 4 words in Scottish Gaelic. The Gaelic definitions are all linked to a particular usage for the word, be it a building, part of a building, or land, or type of place. Saussure was therefore wrong on this occasion in words sounding similar, but right in their difference of meaning. However, there is a word in Welsh and Cornish that is similar in its spelling and meaning, this word is Hireath in Welsh (geiriaduracademi.org) or Hireth in Cornish (cornishdictionary.org.uk), and both words translate as ‘a deep longing for a place known or unknown, a yearning for that which has past, nostalgia for a home you cannot return to, or for a home that has never been’. It is a word deeply rooted to Place, and links to the Thesaurus’s definition of ‘identify, remember, recognise’ except you can’t necessarily put your finger on ‘it’ – it can be an unfulfilled longing. It is a sense of a place.

Lucy Lippard, in “The Lure of The Local” says that “a sense of Place is a virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary life and in traditional educational fields” (p.33) The Aboriginal people use the word ‘Country’ to describe their profound sense of Place. “Country embodies the spirit ancestors who made the land, sea and all living creatures as well as the knowledge, stories and responsibilities tied to those places” (Bunting, p33)



Fig 2 Iona Abbey, Isle of Iona. (nts.org.uk (2023))

Fig 3 Book of Kells (detail)

(nts.org.uk (2023))

In the UK we may not have such a deep and ancient entwined connection to our land, but we do have Sacred Sites dotted around the country, many of which are described as ‘Thin Places’. One of these is The Isle of Iona, on the West Coast of Scotland which has a long history as being a centre of Celtic Spirituality and Pilgrimage site. The Rev George MacLeod, founder of the Christian Ecumenical Community ‘The Iona Community’, describes Iona as “a thin place – only a tissue paper separating the material from the spiritual” (Bentley & Paynter (2011), and as such adopted The Iona Abbey as a site for Retreats and Worship. This allusion to “thin places” ties in with the earlier quote from Karen Armstrong of how Myth speaks of a parallel existence alongside our own reality, and Iona has taken on an almost mystical status through its long-standing connection to Spirituality and Art. The Illuminated Scripts “The Book of Kells” were said to have been started by the early Monks of Iona in circa 800.

Another interpretation of the term ‘thin places’ is given by the Presenter and Writer Ben Fogle in an interview promoting his television series, “Sacred Islands” – “For some, the ‘thin place’ means you’re closer to God; that there’s less space between heaven and earth. For others, it means you’re more connected to the landscape” (2021).

Both of these interpretations of ‘thin place’ carry echoes of ritual, and when that word is looked up in The Dictionary of Critical Theory it brings up “liminality- A ritual space or phase of transition in which a person is no longer what they were but is not yet what they will be. The liminal is the in-between” (Buchanan, 2010). In the ‘thin places’ we are literally in between realms but feel much closer to ‘the realm’ alongside our own physical realm, than we would normally. You can feel a very deep connection to place and reality, and your place in that reality. In today's frantic world these places and this experience of ‘feeling’ is

something we are not accustomed too and it energises us in ways we are not used too, on what can often be interpreted as a highly spiritual level.

CREATIVITY

Creativity is derived from the word ‘create’, which is defined as “make, cause to exist, appoint to a new rank; (slang) make an angry fuss”, with ‘creativity’ meaning “imaginative or inventive” (Thomson, p63), according to The Collins Dictionary. Meanwhile The Collins Thesaurus says the following “creativity = imagination, inspiration, ingenuity, originality, inventiveness, cleverness” (Thomson, p63). The Dictionary of Critical Theory does not have a definition for ‘creativity’, which says a lot about our current educational system and it’s “exhile of feeling” (Robinson, p149). Unsurprisingly, given the importance of Art and Music in the Gaelic Cultures, the Gaelic languages have a few words for creativity – the Cornish have ‘awenekter’ (cornishdictionary.org.uk), the Welsh have ‘creadigrwydd’ (as well as six other variations, depending on the context) (geiriaduracademi.org), and the Scots have ‘cruthachalachd’ and this word is, again, defined more by the word preceeding it to describe the context of its meaning (learngaelic.net). Looking at Saussure the Welsh and the Scots words have a similar sound and have a variety of meanings depending on the context, whilst the Cornish word is on its own.

The Gaelic languages are an interesting exploration of language, as they are similar, yet not similar, but put a room of different Gaelic speakers together and apparently, they can communicate and make themselves understood to Gaelic speakers from all the Celtic Nations. By creatively gesturing and breaking a word into different components the listener could then understand parts of the word before assembling the resulting mental images conjured into the actual word being communicated. In much the same way it is said that

“Cavemen knew that painterly gestures depicting a head, four legs and a tail would mean ‘horse’, if they were put together in a specific way’ (Butterfield, p.9)

Rock Art is the earliest recorded form of Art by Humankind, and it is said that by reproducing an image of something “art was one of man’s first efforts to control the forces of nature” (Hall, p.82). This has somewhat shamanic and ritualistic overtones, and many

Indigenous Tribes/Cultures still practice rituals and artworks today, like the Australian Aboriginal People.



Fig 4. Rock Art, Dalakngalarr,

Fig 5. Rock Art, Borriadaile, Arnhem Land,



Arnhem Land, Australia.

Australia

When asked what Art was in Yolngu Aboriginal Culture “Banduk Marika responded ‘Art is our roots, but we don’t call it “art”. Art is our Land” (Wood Conroy, p.166). Rock Art cannot simply be called Art, it is a Communication System, it conveys what animals and plants are

in the area, where to find water, what is sacred. The recurring image of the hand, in rock art worldwide is said to connect ‘the artist’ to the land – it makes the person placing their hand on the rock a part of that rock, and therefore that place. In some Aboriginal tribes you would stencil your hand on a rock after your first initiation ritual, then the more rituals you go through the more of your forearm can be included in your subsequent imprints on the rock. As Human beings we are “feeling creatures that think, not thinking creatures that feel” (Magsamen, 2023), and as such creativity is our outlet, and way of making sense of the world around us, as well as trying to make sense of our place in it. Feeling and thinking are in fact core to any creative process whether it is Art, Music or Science. It is the ‘gut instinct’ in all of us in some ways, and in many ways, it is a person's way of ‘making a fuss’ – a way of expressing emotion, an outlet, a release of pressure amounted from the lack of control many of us have over our lives.

This release and expression are very important to today's western culture. As a society in general we appear to be plagued by mental illness, stress and anxiety. These malaises have always been present, but not on the current scale. Today we have little sense of community, even in parts of the country. Our lives often revolve around ‘non places’, such as out of town shopping malls, large supermarkets, the Internet. It is hard to get a ‘Sense of Place’ or connection to these places. Life seems more complicated, lacking in feeling, and Creativity appears stifled.

SYNOPSIS

In researching the three Keywords I have found that in some ways they are almost ‘old fashioned’ and ‘quaint’ in many ways. They are at odds with the world in which we currently

reside. It was interesting to find that they are all linked to ‘ritual’ in some way as, again, this is a word with ‘old fashioned’ connotations. Another link for all the words is ‘time’, or their place in time. Myth speaks of another time, in a parallel realm. Place speaks of a connection to events and a space through events in time. Creativity has been practiced throughout time and is a way of making sense of our place in a time.

That these words have an almost archival quality can be seen as what Mark Fisher refers to as “Lost Futures” (p.1), how society appears to be in “stasis: time has stopped” and how “not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible” (p.21) A lot of what Fisher is referring to is how there is nothing new anymore in the fields of Music, Television, and life in general – just reimagining of previous iterations. I would go further and state that at the moment it appears that the ‘cogs of society’ have stalled and are possibly about to go into reverse. This can be seen in America, with some of its recent law changes re Abortion Rights for Women, and it’s ongoing Anti Trans & Drag laws. These are all worrying signs and may be signs of the additional definition of ‘stasis’, which is ‘civil unrest’ – of which there is an almost palpable feeling at times.

A lot of society’s issues can be traced back to the “optimising of productivity, and the shunning of the Arts” (Ross, 2023), and as with Climate Change, there have been warnings of the effect on Society from early on (from William Morris and John Ruskin to Glenn Adamson and Matthew Crawford). Like the warnings of Climate change, these warnings have largely been ignored.

Mechanisation and Technology has had a major impact on many professions and industries. The resulting streamlining that this affords employers of all sizes, has seen a growing sense of opportunities shrinking further. All the ‘lost futures’ that the loss of traditional jobs in industry, retail, and many others, result in a population adrift – the myths that help make sense of the world no longer apply, there is no connection of a Place, and the current

educational system is not supporting the creative Arts – so Creativity is inhibited. There is too much thinking, and not enough feeling.

For my independent study I will be asking “How can Society reconnect to the ‘feeling’ and how can it restore a sense of balance and optimism.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armstrong, Karen (2006) “A Short History of Myth”, (Edinburgh)
Canongate Books Ltd
- Bentley, Jane & Paynter, Neil (2011) “Around A Thin Place”
Wild Goose Publications
- Berger, John (1972) “Ways of Seeing”, (London) Penguin
- Buchanan, Ian (2010) “The Dictionary of Critical Theory (2nd Ed)”,
Oxford reference.com.ezproxy.UWTSD.ac.uk (accessed 18/04/23)
- Bunting, Madeleine (2016) “Love of Country – A Hebridean Journey”, (London)
Granta Publications
- Butterfield, Jan (1993) “The Art of Light”, (New York) Abbeville Press
- Campbell, Don (1997) “The Mozart Effect – Tapping the Power of Music to Heal the
Body, Strengthen the Mind & Unlock the Creative Spirit”, (London)
Hodder and Staunton
- Campbell, Joseph (2005) “The Wisdom of Joseph Campbell, New Dimensions Radio
Interview with Micheal Toms. Hay House (Audio CD – CD1), as seen in Schrader,

Clare (2012) "Ritual Theatre: The Power of Dramatic Ritual in Personal Development Groups and Clinical Practice" (p24), (London) Jessica Kingsley Publishers

- Cornishdictionary.org.uk (accessed 11/04/23)
- Fisher, Mark (2014) "Ghosts of My Life", (UK) Zero Books
- Fogle, Ben (2021) "Ben Fogle: Scotlands Sacred Islands is not just 'another celebrity travelogue'" (Interview with Gayle Ritchie), pressandjournal.com (accessed 14/01/23)
- Geiriaduracademi.org (accessed 11/04/23)
- Hall, Edward T (1969) "The Hidden Dimension", (New York) Anchor Books
- Hall, Rheanna-Marie (04/05/22) "The Book Of Kells", (nts.org.uk) (accessed 18/04/23)
- Inserra, Laura, "Your Brain on Art – How Art Transforms Us",
The World Hope Forum Webinar (Zoom) (12/03/23)
- Learngaelic.net (accessed 11/04/23)
- Lippard, Lucy (1997) "The Lure of The Local", (New York) The New Press
- Magsamen, Susan, "Your Brain on Art – How Art Transforms Us",
The World Hope Forum Webinar (Zoom) (12/03/23)
- Ross, Ivy, "Your Brain on Art – How Art Transforms Us",
The World Hope Forum Webinar (Zoom) (12/03/23)
- Thomson, Mark (2016) "Collins English Dictionary",
(Glasgow) Harper Collins Publishers
- Thomson, Mark (2016) "Collins English Thesaurus"
(Glasgow) Harper Collins Publishers
- Wood Conroy, Diana (1995) "Both Ways: Yolngu & Ngarraindjeri Weaving in Australian Arts Practice" (as seen in Rawley, Sue (Ed) (1997) "Craft and Contemporary Theory" (St Leonard's, Australia) Allen & Unwins

- Wroth, David (2020) “Rainbow Serpent Dreamtime Story”,
japingkaaboriginalart.com (accessed 18/04/23)

FIGURES

Fig 1 – DU Photography/Alamy Stock Photo (nd) “Cave Painting at Rainbow Serpent Shelter, Mount Borradaile in Western Arnhem Land, Northern Australia.”,
(nms.ac.uk) (accessed 18/04/23)

Fig 2 – National Trust Scotland (nd) “Iona Abbey”, nts.org.uk (accessed 18/04/23)

Fig 3 – National Trust Scotland (nd) “The Book of Kells – ‘St Johns Gospel’”, (nts.org.uk)
(accessed 18/04/23)

Fig 4 – Stuart, Barbara (2017) “Rock Art Images, Dalakngalarr 1 Rockshelter in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory”, (heritagesciencejournal.springeropen.com) (accessed 19/04/23)

Fig 5 – Henley, Sue (10/03/23) “Rock Art, Mount Borradaile, Arnhem Land”,
(australiantraveller.com) (accessed 12/04/23)

FURTHER READING RE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY

As well as revisiting Authors who I have used in previous modules, (such as Richard Sennett, Nigel Cross, Peter Korn, & Walter Benjamin), I would like to look at the following texts in particular:

- Adamson, Glenn (2007) “Thinking Through Craft”, (Oxford) BergPublishers
- Brinkerhoff Jackson, John (1994) “A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time”,
Yale University Press

- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1990) “Flow”, (New York) Harper Collins
- Fisher, Mark (2009) “Capitalist Realism”, Zero Books
- Goleman, Daniel (1996) “Emotional Intelligence”, (London) Bloomsbury
- Lippard, Lucy (1995) “Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory”,
(New York) The New Press
- Magsamen, Susan & Ross, Ivy (2023) “Your Brain on Art – How the Arts
Transform Us”, (Edinburgh) Canongate Books Ltd
- Pasztory, Ester (2005) “Thinking with Things”, University of Texas Press
- Pye, David (1995) “The Nature and Art of Workmanship”, Herbert Press
- Robinson, Ken (2015) “Creative Schools: Revolutionary Education from the Ground
Up”, (London) Allen Lane
- Solnit, Rebecca (2014) “The Faraway Nearby”, Granta Books
- Yanagi, Soetsu (adapted by Bernard Leach) (1989) “The Unknown Craftsman”,
Kodansha International