



ART, MYTH, AND MEMORY

An Investigation into the Relationship Between Ancient Myths, Collective and Cultural Memory and the Visual Arts

ALESSANDRA CAMPOLI

University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland (UK)

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at investigating the relationship between collective and cultural memory, myth, and contemporary art practice. Artists in the past have relied on the power of myth to visually speak to their audience, re-presenting myths in an illusionistic way. Today art is not conventionally telling stories anymore and is disentangled from the need for mimesis. How has the relation between art and myth changed outside the framework of representational art? Is the connection between myth and collective and cultural memory used in contemporary art practice? How do art and myth intersect today?

1. Introduction

In myths lie ancient symbols expressing philosophical and ethical meanings. The power of these symbols and meanings, which may have often long receded into subconsciousness, crosses time, space, and cultures.

There exists something like a spontaneous rediscovery or remembrance of the original purpose of mythological symbols. These last become then a potentially cross-generational and cross-cultural lexicon sinking its roots into shared collective memory.

Artists in the past were familiar with ancient myths. They employed them to visually speak to their audience, relying on subconscious memories that can connect people to mythological characters and allegories and the meanings that they convey.

However, the connection between myth and the visual arts persists today. Recent studies analysing the work of contemporary artists that have referred, more or less explicitly, to ancient myths, confirm this ongoing interest (Cahill, 2018; Loring Wallace and Hirsh 2011).

Do artists still today, as in the past, employ mythological visual symbols to connect to people's subconscious memory? How can myth always be such a powerful tool to convey meanings visually? How does it keep appealing to new audiences, linking to current issues, and still communicating in such a compelling fashion? Do contemporary art and myth share a similar language?

This paper aims to answer these questions through the analysis of philosophical and visual theories that connect myth, memory, and art creation and consumption. It also aims at fostering reflection upon the relationship between myth, visual symbols, and collective and cultural memory in today's art world.

2. Visual Symbols and Memory-Images

Let me begin with the obvious statement that a blind man cannot perceive a visual message. Visual messages crowd upon us, and we are all blind to most of them. Response to every visual message would make life quite unbearable. It would be like listening to hundreds of verbal messages frozen into permanence. It is,

therefore, most fortunate that the only visual messages which find a response in our brain are those which we judge in some way or other useful or important to us. When that happens, the visual sign or symbol communicates a meaning. (Wittkover, 1987: 174)

This is the incipit of Rudolf Wittkover's essay *Interpretation of Visual Symbols* written in 1977 and published in the magistral collection of essays that form the volume *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*.

Wittkover's statement presupposes an active engagement of the viewer with visual symbols – being it a traffic light or a masterpiece. If we don't recognise a visual symbol, if the symbol doesn't resonate with us – more or less explicitly – we tend not to engage with it.

I find this active engagement of the viewer particularly interesting as it shifts the act of looking at an artwork from a simple process of passive consumption to a more complex and dynamic process in which the viewer 'chooses', more or less consciously, what to look at and what to uncodify. We look at something, and two things may happen: 1. That something doesn't resonate with us, and we ignore it 2. That that something evokes a memory that belongs to us, our brain and emotions activate, we start looking for meanings, we want to know more, we want to understand. We might like that piece of art or not – that is an aesthetic appreciation which is an entirely different aspect of art consumption – nevertheless, we are intrigued by it.

But what is that quid that we may recognise and that activates that process? It is a memory, sometimes an individual memory but most of the time a collective one. It is the recognition of a familiar symbol that connects to our social, cultural, or collective experience, as 'representational meaning cannot be understood unless the objects or events shown by the artist belong to the general human experience' (Wittkover, 1987: 177). Without such knowledge or emotional involvement, the representation would be an alien phenomenon.

In the introduction to 'Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture', Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik state that 'art and popular culture enact memory and generate processes of memory' (Plate and Smelik, 2013: 4).

They *do* memory. They generate it by enacting the past into the present. They specifically refer to the relation between art and cultural memory, defined as the ways in which a culture remembers (Plate and Smelik, 2013: 2). Like Wittkover, they emphasise the relation between viewer and visual artefact as a dynamic and two-way process and on the connection between visual images and collective memory.

The function of the visual artefact is, in this case, to bring to light those memory images that 'are opaque, like frosted glass which scarcely a ray of light can penetrate' (Kracauer, 1927 in Farr, 2012: 46). Memory images and visual artefacts share indeed a similar nature, that visual quality that is intangible for the first and tangible for the second. The viewer's engagement with a visual representation that they find familiar may trigger the movement of memory from the depths to the surface, from the Bergsonian pure memory to memory-images, into a region or presence which is similar, in fact, to that of perception (Ricoeur, 2004 in Farr, 2012: 68). Engaging emotionally, physically, intellectually with visual artefacts would give us access to that repository of images situated in the 'memory palace' of Ciceronian tradition (Yates, 1966).

But what kind of memories does an active emotional and intellectual engagement with the symbols represented in visual artefacts evoke and brings to light? What are the principles under which visual expression is stored in the archives of memory? How do they form and reemerge? (Gombrich, 1970: 222)

3. Human and Collective Memory

According to the art historian Aby Warburg, whose scholarly work aimed at showing 'the collective human origins of every authentic image' (Forster, 1976: 171):

the individual work of art has a value above all as a record, as a highly complex and productive response of human memory to a particular situation. The peculiar quality of artefacts lies in their socially mediated functions (as memory response). (Forster, 1976: 172)

If we agree with Warburg, the memory images that visual artefacts would give us access to are particular memories that are just fragments

belonging to a broader collective human memory. Because artefacts are produced in a specific time, context, and culture, they give that human memory a form - or style - that belongs to that specific time, context, and culture. They transform human memory into a more accessible collective memory, conceived here as a static base of knowledge shared by a culture of individuals (Wertsch and Roediger, 2008: 319; Dudai, 2002). It is, in fact, 'in society that people normally acquire their memory. It is also in society that they recall, recognise, and localise their memories' (Halbwachs, 1992:38). Those social memories - acquired by individuals that share the same cultural tool kit (Burner, 1990) - are the ones that resonate with us when we look at visual artefacts. But those social memories just mirror - for Warburg - a more comprehensive human memory which can be interpreted as parallel to Jungian archetypes (Felixmuller, 2017: 211).

Artefacts mediate between human and collective - or cultural - memory. And they do so by transforming old symbols into familiar symbols embedded with understandable meaning. Indeed, to go back to Wittkover and the concepts mentioned at the beginning of the paper, 'each generation not only interprets its own meaning into those older symbols to which it is drawn by affinity but also creates new symbols by using, modifying and transforming those of the past' (Wittkover, 1987: 184). Artists like Picasso and Henry Moore, to mention just two well-known examples, revitalise old symbols and create new ones.

In this preservation and revitalisation of symbolic images belonging to the viewer's cultural memory and that bring to light traces of collective human memory, myth plays a primary role. Indeed, in myths lie ancient symbols expressing philosophical and moral meanings, a kind of philosophy in the form of poetry, a sort of dramaturgy of the inner sphere (Lavedan, 1931; Diel, 1966).

4. Myth

Definitions of myth and mythologies have been attempted throughout history and across different disciplines. The notion of myth has been widely investigated, and a critical review of this notion is not the aim of this essay. The focus here is instead on understanding the relationship

between myth, memory, and artistic expression, and how myth translates memories and visual symbols into a language that artists have adopted in different ways through time.

In this context, mythology is conceived as 'an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality' (Armstrong, 2005: 7). To do so, myth should act as a mediator between the human existence and the core of reality and have traits that belong to both: it should have happened once, but it should also have happened all the time (Armstrong, 2005: 7). Going back to the notions of human and collective memory, we could compare the single myth to collective memory and mythology – as the corpus of myths – to the Warburgian human memory.

Levi-Strauss – who extensively investigated the nature and meanings of myth – was intrigued by this ambivalence of myth and in one of the Massey lessons in 1977 stated:

Mythical stories are, or seem, arbitrary, meaningless, absurd, yet nevertheless, they seem to reappear all over the world. A 'fanciful' creation of the mind in one place would be unique – you would not find the same creation in a completely different place. My problem was trying to find out if there was some kind of order behind this apparent disorder – that's all. And I do not claim that there are conclusions to be drawn. (Levi-Strauss, 2001 [1978]: 8-9)

Myth is translatable into an event or a series of events that take place in a specific place and time and that can be narrated, communicated, and transformed into visual or verbal images. But myth also happens outside time and place and conveys meanings that belong to another layer of existence, an archetypal reality of whom our reality is a pale shadow. Myth evolves through time, but the meanings that it conveys are timeless. 'Just as it translates from place to place, myth stands outside time' (Cahill, 2018: 11). Myth is particular and universal, is incredible and true. In this ambivalence lies its strength and its power as an active agent of communication and especially of visual communication. In fact, myth is particularly prevalent and vivid in art, and this is 'because it does what art does: like art itself, it resonates

across time, metamorphosing into new forms and reinventing itself, while retaining a recognizable bone structure. Like art, it has the capacity to compress past and present' (Cahill, 2018: 16). Like a piece of art, furthermore, myth can only be understood in its totality (Levi-Strauss, 2001 [1978]: 40): the sequence of events in myth, like brushstrokes in a painting or the compositional elements in any other artworks, is functional to the creation of the whole.

To conclude, we can state that thanks to its 'placelessness', portability, and flexibility, myth's appeal has endured. Artists have used it as a metalanguage, as a way of seeing – to agree with Roland Barthes (2009) – to unravel, unlock and encrypt complex or hidden meanings, to give a shape to allegories and memories.

5. Myth, Art, and Memory

The relation between art and classical myth¹ has been ongoing and lasted more than two-thousand years.

In the Renaissance inspiration to ancient texts and artworks made mythology a popular theme among painters and sculptors. The narrative of myths derived from the past, but myths – thanks to their flexibility and tendency to morph themselves – could be easily translated into a modern language and interpreted according to modern ideas, thoughts, and philosophies. In the mythological art of the Renaissance, that process of migration and transformation of symbols described by Wittkover (1987: 184) and mentioned above in this paper is particularly evident. Older symbols were interpreted in light of new ideologies, and new symbols were created by modifying those of the past. 'In the Renaissance, classical mythology became modern' (Cahill, 2018: 13) (Figures 1 and 2).

¹ This paper is focused on the relation between Western art and Classical Greek and Latin myth, only. The author aims to expand this research in a more transcultural perspective.

Figure 1. 'The Birth of Venus'



Source: Sandro Botticelli (1483-85)

Figure 2. 'Danae'



Source: Titian (1544-46).

The interest in mythology persisted in the Baroque age, with some masterpieces being created, such as Lorenzo Bernini's 'The Rape of Proserpina' and Caravaggio's 'Narcissus' and in the 1700s and 1800s. (Figures 3, 4, and 5).

Figure 3. 'The Rape of Proserpina'



Source: Lorenzo Bernini (1621-22).

Figure 4. 'Narcissus'



Source: Caravaggio (1597-99).

Figure 5. 'Proserpine'.



Source: Dante Gabriele Rossetti (1874).

Why this persistence?

Following Camus, Loring Wallace and Hirsh in *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth* (2011) suggest that the nature of myth's appeal to art

history derives from the fact that the real subject of mythological stories lies elsewhere where deeper meanings are conveyed:

Myth's insistence that its meaning and subject lie elsewhere functions as an invitation to the reader or viewer to interpret, that is, to *construct* meaning; and while this kind of (consciously felt) rerouting may not be the effect of myth exclusively - for example, allegory, which all myths maybe, also takes as its defining characteristic the manifest elsewhere of meaning - it is nevertheless surely at the heart of myth's enduring appeal. (Loring Wallace and Hirsh, 2011: 5)

This means that art has used myth not as a way of illustrating stories but as a way of communicating complex meanings. This emphasis on 'meaning' helps us explain why the presence of myth has successfully endured in contemporary art.

As we know, contemporary art has detached from the mimetic and illusionistic representation of reality, and its scope is not translating words into visual images. Despite the disentanglement from mimesis, ancient myths are still now an active presence in art.

Exactly as the real meaning of myth lies elsewhere, the real meaning of contemporary art lies elsewhere. Contemporary art, like myths, is allegorical. They are both 'made to speak of other things, or to encrypt hidden meanings' (Cahill, 2018: 13). They both mirror and reshape, distort reality.

Myth in contemporary art is used less as a subject than as a method, as an "interpretative strategy" to access and unlock ancient and immutable mysteries and meanings (Loring Wallace and Hirsh, 2011: 7-8). Mysteries and meanings that - as stated above - belong to our collective or human memory.

In the aftermath of the conceptual turn, the visual arts are positioned to participate in the aesthetic discourse inaugurated by myth, posing for themselves questions posed previously on *their behalf* by the plotline of classical mythology. (Loring Wallace and Hirsh, 2011: 9)

The relationship between myth and contemporary art is thus complicated and more than a representation of myths in contemporary art, we should talk about elaboration and

analysis of myths through contemporary art. A process that is possible exactly for that dynamicity and flexibility that characterize myth, for its capability of being deconstructed and remade, of merging with everyday life. Of being modern.

"Myth seems to demand to be transplanted into the present, reinterpreted according to present-day ideas or anxieties. In the process, it offers a means of either cloaking or confronting real like - or both" (Cahill, 2018: 16).

References to myth in contemporary art can be more or less explicit and more or less voluntary. Myth is sometimes clearly evoked and other times subtly alluded to. In both cases, whether or not a mythological narrative emerges from the artwork, myth is there and brings powerful meanings to the work of art.

From Yves Klein's "Leap into the Void" to Chris Burden's performance "Icarus", the myth of the young son of Dedalus who flew too close to the sun with his wax wings until they melted has become a symbol of hubris, over-ambition, and pushing of the human limits. Yayoi Kusama (Figure 6) and Patty Chang use the myth of Narcissus - who seeing himself reflected in the water fell in love with his own image and died of consumption looking at it - to talk about vanity and self-awareness.

Figure 6. 'Narcissus Garden'.



Source: Yayoi Kusama. Installation at Inhotim in Brumadinho, Brazil, 2010.

The myth of Orpheus who tried to take back from the underworld his wife Eurydice after her death, but without success, symbolises loss and grief in Felix Gonzalez Torres and Bracha Ettinger's work (Figure 7).

Figure 7. 'Eurydice n.23'



Source: Bracha Ettinger, 2005

The Russian artist Vadim Zakharov in his complex installation-performance "Danae" (Figure 8) used the ancient myth to question the role of women in society.

Figure 8. 'Danae'.



Source: Vadim Zakharov, 2013.

The myth of Arachne – who was transformed into a spider for having challenged the goddess Athena to a weaving contest – is used by Louise Bourgeois (Figure 9) to refer to her relationship with her mother (who was a weaver) and by Kan Xuan to represent the monotony and loneliness of night-shift worker in China.

Figure 9. 'Maman'.



Source: Louise Bourgeois, 1999.

6. Conclusion

Either used to portray personal loss or feelings or as a tool to creatively discuss social issues, myth's presence in contemporary art and its power as a medium to convey complex meanings can't be denied.

As stated above, the myth's flexibility and morphing roots make it adaptable to any time, context, or culture. Furthermore, its references to universal values and its capability of connecting to and evoking ancestral, archetypal, and lost memories are, in the case of art and specifically contemporary art, particularly important. Sometimes we don't need a title – and some of the titles don't specifically refer to the myth – to 'recognise' a memory-image and to decode it.

I started this paper by quoting Wittkover's statement that the only visual messages which find a response in our brain and that we engage with are those which we judge as somehow useful or essential to us. I referred to Warburg's theory that the value of an individual work lies in its function as a record, as a productive and creative response of human memory to a particular situation. I related those social memories – acquired by individuals that share the same cultural tool kit (Burner, 1990) to the ones that resonate with us when we look at visual artefacts.

I can conclude that the relation between myth, memory, and contemporary art is intense and complicated and would deserve further investigation. Still, we can assert that mythological art not only is of 'its moments' (Cahill, 2018: 12) but is of every moment and that 'looking' at myth could help us reflect on those values, languages, and memories that are borderless and that we share as humans.

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