

BA Dissertation

BA Fine Art

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What is the archetypal myth of the 21st century?

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09/05/18

Word Count: 7,787

My goal is to find what the archetypal myth of the 21st century is. My proposition is that myths are a constant evolution of their previous forms and through their study we can discern aspects of our main contemporary myth. The epic is the genre of myth on which this essay will concentrate because amongst other things this myth is a quest of a heroic nature. Throughout my investigation I delved into the nature of myths, the epic, their mythico-poetic quality and their relationship to images.

I performed an extensive research through the *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*¹, which is a compendium of myths from around the world, where I selected and studied 40 myths that related to the idea of the epic. After this initial research, and upon reflection I decided that the 21st century myth's main characteristic was an ever-growing desire and belief that it is possible to conquer life through learning done by our own means and on our own terms. This learning could be through life experience, academia, or technology; but also learning through the acknowledgment and understanding of what or who the antagonist to us or our goals is, and why that is the case; and ultimately the repetitively and potentially absurd nature of this whole quest.

I further distilled my research into five myths, which I analysed and studied in depth, it became evident that certain myths drew similarities in their structure and theme with some of the other myths that I hadn't selected. Therefore, having studied a greater number of myths enriched my understanding, even if those myths were not the five that I selected.

¹ Pierre Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992

The myths I focused on were the one of Don Juan, as the romantic nomad, paired with his female counterpart in the shape of Carmen; Faust as the unquenchable academic, linked with the themes of immortality and its price, also found in the myth of Decadence and that of the Wandering Jew; the myth of the Feathered Serpent or Quetzalcoatl, as the bringer of technology and culture, matching with that of Prometheus; the myth of Satan as that of the enemy of mankind, linked with the myth of paradise and freedom of choice; and finally the myth of the absurd and tireless Sisyphus with that of the quest progress.

I also incorporated two artists into the essay, because I believe that they serve a very important role as communicators of the concerns of an age. Anselm Kiefer was selected because his work deals with the idea of the myth itself, especially through a historical perspective. Pierre Huyghe was chosen for the forward-looking nature of his work and the way it complimented the prediction presented in the conclusion.

Firstly, the definition of what is understood as myth has to be established. According to Gilbert Durand “by myth we understand a dynamic system of symbols, archetypes and schemas, a dynamic system that tends, when prompted by a schema, to take the form of a story.”² Myths are of recurrent existence in society, every society has one or several. Across millennia, the wants, desires and beliefs have radically altered, and yet it is still possible to discern recurrent threads.

² Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures Anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire: Introduction à L'archétypologie Générale*. 11e. ed. Paris: Dunod, 1992 in Pierre Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, X

Myth's purposes are diverse, the explanatory myths, as the name suggests attempt to explain the origin or current state of something. Therefore, this normally leads them to be placed in "primordial times"³, at least during a time when things began and were acquiring their nature. Their place at the beginning of time is closely related to their tendency to explain how things came into being as could be the case with something as inconceivably big as the Cosmos, or as mundane as a city. Helping to explain things that are even an intrinsic part of human nature, and which is the causality of the institutions and laws that might exist in a society. The origins of said myths are often blurry, more than having a specific and unique author or source of origin they are the distillation of the consciousness of a collective, and they are the embodiment of a tradition.

By pinpointing the 21st century myth, we are declaring it of an archetypal nature. An archetype can be understood as the first real example of something. The word first not only or necessarily understood as premiere to appear, but also as it's most ideal in the Platonic sense; the Platonic sense taken to mean that subsequent examples, are versions of that original⁴; that original "is the supreme type, the absolute, the perfect image that transcends particular circumstances because it goes straight to the essential point wherever one chooses to tap it whether the context is religious, mythical or fictional."⁵

³ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality. Religious Traditions of the World*. Y. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1998 in Brunel, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, X

⁴ Gail Fine, *Plato*. Oxford Readings in Philosophy. Y. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 146

⁵ Regis Boyer, "Archetypes" in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, 114-5

The epic whether ancient or modern can be defined by an account of heroism that transcends irony and ultimately is 'a longing for a sustained vision'⁶. The existence of the hero within an epic presents the skeleton of its archetypal nature as suggested by the Heroic model⁷ in which the hero is defined and established by his quest, as much as the possibility and successful completion of said quest defines its heroic nature. This quest tends to display a certain set of characteristics. The hero is of a somehow illustrious birth, generally because that eminence is a reflection of their divinity and similarity with the gods, that sets him apart from the ordinary, and yet he or she is mostly oblivious to it until he or she is exposed to the truth. He or she is forced to undergo a sort of initiation ordeal, which will be an opportunity to prove his or her worth. This initiation is often expressed in the form of a journey, as much physical as spiritual in which he or she will encounter one or a series of confrontations or obstacles be them in the form of the siege of a castle, a monstrous or divine being, or even death itself. Success in such confrontations is often of great consequence to a great number of people. For ridding them of the threat, the people tend to look up to the hero for further leadership. In the case that the hero was of noble origin, this often results in seeing him or her instituted into the throne, if, however, there is another source of political authority, the issue of subordination may prove difficult for the hero. The success ultimately leads to a reward, even if it's not in the form of political authority, this leads to an overwhelming pride and increase of his or her ego, and in this intoxication with its own greatness the hero's

⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Epic*. Bloom's Literary Criticism 20th Anniversary Collection. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005.

⁷ Philippe Sellier, "Heroism", in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, 558

character can be corrupted. This leads to either punishment from the gods, or failure in a subsequent endeavour. To achieve purification the hero requires an expiatory act, sometimes death. Death is a challenge that the hero will inevitably have to deal with due to his or her, at least partly, human nature. Since no ordinary human can best and subsequently kill the hero, death occurs either through treason and betrayal, or through acceptance and willingness to depart. In either case, death is not a source of horror, but the possibility of rest, or in certain cases even an apotheosis,⁸ in which they raise to a divine status. The reward, which will come in this life or a sort of afterlife, will be one of eternal existence, even if only in the minds of the people.

The epic is relevant in the 21st century because it is an expression of the desire to create a version of the self that is established on the terms that you yourself ascertain, and are somehow beyond the restriction inherent by time and space. This is what is often sought when listening to the narrative of an epic narrative, to inhabit the reality of the protagonist.

One of the characteristics of contemporary society is the availability of choice, in every aspect of our lives, which has been made available by globalization, and now even more so by the constant expansion of the Internet, choice is sought because it is equated to freedom. A result of extensive choice is a perpetual need for change. It therefore draws parallels with the character of Don Juan, which has the reputation

⁸ Anonymous, "Apotheosis", *ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA*, Accessed: 26/11/17
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/apotheosis>

of the consummate womanizer, since his first appearance in *El burlador de Sevilla*⁹ around 1630. Don Juan was famous for saying that he had a very limited time to devote to each woman he loved “one day to fall in love with her, one day to seduce her, one to abandon her, two to replace her and an hour to forget her.”¹⁰

This of course can be seen under very different lights depending on what the focus of Don Juan’s purpose is. A sanctimonious perception was that he was punishing the ease with which women surrender themselves to him, both emotionally and physically, by leaving them once he has their love. On the other hand, with perhaps a more open-minded approach we can see that the reason is further ingrained into his nature and is therefore more introspective. Don Juan also falls in love with ease, he can love profoundly and with his whole self, but once the process is complete, he feels the need to repeat it all again and offer his gift to another woman. The word gift is intentional, because while he is with them, they get to enjoy all the beauties of love, the sadness is that the duration is brief, and the end is inevitable. This poses the question of whether it is necessary to ‘love rarely in order to love much.’¹¹

The situation doesn’t even necessarily deal with rejection, Don Juan doesn’t stop desiring the woman he is with, the beauty and characteristics that attracted him in the first place are still present, he simply desires another one. It is key to understand what he perceives to be love; the feelings towards each woman that he falls in love

⁹ Molina, Tirso De, Rodríguez López-Vázquez, Alfredo, and Téllez, Gabriel, 1570?-1648. *El Burlador De Sevilla*. 4a ed. Letras Hispánicas ; 58. Madrid: Catedra, 1991

¹⁰ Zorrilla, José, and Gómez, José Luis. Don Juan Tenorio. 2a ed. Clásicos Universales Planeta. Y. Barcelona: Planeta, 1990, 70

¹¹ Albert Camus, *The Plague; The Fall; Exile and the Kingdom; and Selected Essays*. Trans. David Bellos Everyman's Library; No. 278. New York; London: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, 549

with are the result of an exclusive mixture of desire, affection and intelligence. The combination is a unique formula, therefore, these questions whether the feelings that he felt for all the women could fall under the umbrella of love, and if not, which characteristics are required for it to be called love.

He is not so different from Carmen¹², as presented by Prosper Mérimée. Carmen was portrayed as a woman of a dark and sensuous beauty. She feels free to love whomever she wishes. She is individualistic, and lives life in its most ephemeral form. By placing so much emphasis in the present her reactions are instinctive, her immediate needs are of the foremost importance. Her difference from Don Juan is that whilst his transitory approach to love is almost admired, hers, for being a woman, was punished and condemned not only by subsequent writers but also within the play itself. She enamours Don José, with her indomitable and provocative beauty, but his attraction to this chaos that she represents quickly turns to fear and anger towards what he can't possess or understand.

With the removal of the uneven judgment towards her, we are able to see the similarity in the nature of their approach. Carmen and Don Juan are not collecting partners, collection would imply that they are living off their past, when their epicurean pleasures can only be enjoyed in the moment. Love and pleasure, food and money, are all chips in a game. The game is 'loving and possessing, conquering and consuming – that is his way of knowing.'¹³

¹²Merimee, Prosper. *Carmen*. Translated by Lady Mary Lloyd. The Gutenberg Project Ebook #2465, 2016

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2465/2465-h/2465-h.htm>

¹³ Camus, *The Plague; The Fall; Exile and the Kingdom; and Selected Essays*, 553

'Knowing'¹⁴ is a euphemism in many languages for the sexual act derived from the biblical Hebrew usage. The fruit of knowledge that Eve consumes, expressed by the word 'yada'¹⁵ not only permitted distinction between good and evil, but it made Adam and Eve aware of their nakedness, and the knowledge they possessed of the other. Partly through the intimacy of lovemaking Carmen and Don Juan achieved knowledge by living. The question that they pose is whether happiness can be achieved through constant difference, or whether it has to be eternal and unique to be worth pursuing.

Both Don Juan and Carmen may have known life, but their knowledge was instinctive and far from rational. It wasn't necessarily reflective, as it tends to be the case with academic knowledge.

The story of Faust has various roots based in historical accounts, but for the purposes of the essay we will focus on the literary myth established by Goethe.¹⁶ Faust, the unquenchable academic, believes that he has exhausted the knowledge of the world, and in desperation to find reasons to live turns to the occult. A thirst that was so powerful that he was willing to wager his soul with Mephistopheles in order to quench it. The wager established that Mephistopheles would show Faust everything that there was to see and experience in the world, and the former would

¹⁴Doniger, Wendy, "Carnal Knowledge", Fathom Archive, Accessed: 16/03/18
<http://fathom.lib.uchicago.edu/1/777777121879/>

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy: Parts One and Two Fully Revised*, Translated: Martin Greenberg, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2014, 1710

win Faust's soul if Faust was ever satiated in their quest, and didn't want to continue exploring.

Faust exposes the desire in man to aspire for knowledge and love, and in his strife constantly challenging the established limits of humanity. In that quest, especially when that possibility is opened by a catalytic figure, the risk of it all leading to ruin and failure is always present. This is the case because one of the most profound desires is to assert an independence of choice, the choice of the object of pursuit, the freedom to pursue it and the methods to obtain it generally lead to a choice, in its most dramatic, between good and evil, that will necessary lead to a determination of loyalty to someone, and rejection of the other. Faust's need is very complex because it is a wavering choice between 'gratifying immediate desire and satisfying the profound aspirations of his being.'¹⁷ Every time that he would have a new experience, or enjoy a new sensation, he would be forced to move on to the next thing. "Oh yes, do show me the fruit that rots as you try to pick it, trees whose leaves bud daily, daily die!"¹⁸ The transitory nature of the pact and therefore the experiences that Faust had was a commentary on the very ephemeral nature of satisfaction. On the story this led him to seek for a sort of eternity, of infinite and constant availability. Selling, his soul can even be understood to be metaphorically, if he cannot subtract enjoyment from life, he is already without a soul, so he has nothing to lose. Human life is finite, and that natural expiration limits the possibility of enjoyment, and yet, eternal life without purpose or pleasure leaves out a sterile

¹⁷ André Dabezie, "Jesus Christ in Literature", in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, 434

¹⁸ Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy: Parts One and Two Fully Revised*, 1710

time, and can make the theft of the possibility of death, a perpetual condemnation. “What matters”, said Nietzsche “is not eternal life, but eternal vivacity.” All drama is, in fact, in this choice.¹⁹

This leads Faust to question his life: “My sole wish has been what? – to desire, sate my desire and desire again, all over.”²⁰ The possibility of desire keeps the interest in life.

With an accumulation of knowledge often comes progress; it was often thought that most cultures’ first access to developments came in the form of a divine aid.

However, in a world of constant innovation science has taken the shape of the divine, and any individual that makes enough of a contribution takes on the role of a benevolent being.

The myth of the feathered serpent, or Quetzalcoatl for the Aztecs and Kukulcan for the Mayans, was one of the most prominent in Mesoamerica. Quetzalcoatl’s figure appears to be based on historical accounts, yet the way the story was passed on, he was of a divine nature. He is thought to have been a great king of the Toltecs, and years later priests were meant to acquire the title of ‘Quetzalcoatl’²¹ after they had reached enlightenment. Physically, he is described as a broad, tall, and bearded man, powerfully built. Intellectually, he is meant to have been a lawgiver, and innovator in agriculture, mathematics and the arts and crafts. Morally, he was said to have loved every creature, and avoided hurting any living things, which is why he didn’t

¹⁹ Camus, *The Plague; The Fall; Exile and the Kingdom; and Selected Essays*, 559

²⁰ Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy: Parts One and Two Fully Revised*, 11790

²¹ Irene Nicholson. *Mexican and Central American Mythology*. London; New York: Hamlyn, 1967, 95

require human sacrifices. His most important contribution was the gift that he gave to man in the form of maize, when he transformed into a black ant and stole a grain of maize from the red ants and gave to the people the nourishment that they required for their very existence.²²

His downfall occurred when Tezcatlipoca, the god of the nocturnal sky and his chief enemy and envious of Quetzalcoatl's life, showed Quetzalcoatl his reflection, seeing an ugliness that to the latter seemed barely human, hid in shame fearing the repulsion of his subjects. Tezcatlipoca provided his rival with a beautiful garment made of Quetzal feathers, and a mask of turquoise, with this newly acquired beauty, Quetzalcoatl came out of his retreat. He was later tempted by evil magicians into drunkenness, to the point where he had carnal relations with his sister Quetzalpetlatl. When Quetzalcoatl became sober, he realized that he had ceased to live an ascetic and clean life, and this filled him with great sadness. His shame was such that he built a great fire, where he self-immolated in his fine garments and his heart, engulfed by flames became Venus.²³

When the pursuit of knowledge is done for the benefit of society, the consequences can be different. Hesiod believed that gods' as much as humans' greatest downfall was hubris, in which excessive ambition and pride would lead to overreaching.²⁴ Progress in one respect or another requires a manner of overreaching, the question is whether the punishment comes by failure, or it's simply the price to pay for development. If punishment is inevitable, the bringer of such knowledge often must

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Raymond Trousson, "Prometheus" in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, 968

sacrifice his own wellbeing for the betterment of the people around him, even if that punishment comes by the hands of the very people that he is trying to save. The desire for self-improvement becomes paradoxical by the imperfection of being; betterment to the point of perfection can be a never-ending quest. In the end change is a rebellion against the status quo, and therefore it requires a fight against the authority that asserts that things must be the way they are and have been in the past, whether that authority is divine or mortal, it simply sets out the obstacle that the creator must overcome in order to change it.

It is thought that before Quetzalcoatl threw himself into the fire, he promised to return. This belief became so intrinsic through the generations that when Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519²⁵, with the Spanish gold fever, he was thought by the Aztecs to have been Quetzalcoatl. He was white and bearded; him and the Conquistadors came riding horses, animals which were unknown in Mesoamerica, and they had rifles which threw fire. The Conquistadors were received with open arms, which allowed Cortes a platform to conquer the Aztec Empire. Hernán Cortés proved to be a Quetzalcoatl of sorts, the Europeans brought a great deal of development and technologies, but they also brought empires to their knees, and with it death and unspeakable suffering.

Societies, and countries, as much as individuals constantly have an established enemy that represents an opposition to the values they hold dear, and whose very opposition defines them.

²⁵ Dorita Nouhaud, "Eldorado", in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, 444

The figure of Satan that concerns this essay is in part that put forward in the Old and New Testament. As it is mostly understood now, Lucifer was the most beautiful of the angels that due to pride and rebellion fell from grace and was banished from Heaven. During the Jewish captivity in Babylon²⁶, the perception of Satan that was adopted was that of an adversary, both to God and to Man. However, there are varying theories for the reasons of such adversity, which is affected by Satan's understood status and power in relation to God.

The dualistic theory²⁷ places God and Satan in equal standing, both as creators and opposing forces of good and evil. God, on one hand created pure and eternal souls, whilst Satan's lifeless flesh-lumps were destined to decay and destruction. Both creations, however, could affect the other, the souls could animate the bodies, and the bodies entrapped the souls that craved bodily delights. This resulted in a cycle of animation, pursuit and death.

If, however, it is thought that Satan is in fact inferior to God, there are generally two approaches. In both approaches it is understood that God created both Satan and Man, and Man was created with both soul and body.

One theory suggests that God intentionally placed Satan in order to test human's resolve to obey God.²⁸ The action of Eve consuming the fruit of Knowledge of Good and Evil through the snake's temptation and against the direct instructions of God, raises a couple of considerations that need to be brought up alongside the theory.

²⁶ Roland Villeneuve, "Satan", in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, 1008

²⁷ Yuval N. Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. 2016, 185

²⁸ Kelly, Henry Ansgar. *Satan: A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 21

Firstly, the fairness of the punishment for individuals that could not have possibly foreseen the terrible consequences placed on the whole of the human race for that one disobedience. Regardless of the punishment, however, it becomes a representation of the ease with which a sensuous element encouraged by an external element, in the case of Eve, and its assimilation and imitation in the case of Adam, can counteract a divine command. The dilemma that Adam and Eve faced in Genesis, extends into that of the people born thereafter.

The other theory suggests Satan is weaker, but yet defiant of God.²⁹ He almost performs guerrilla warfare against God, knowing that he cannot beat him in a direct show of strength. The battlefield is the soul of men and women. The seduction tools, which would have been used to test, are now in fact employed to rob souls of their promise to be with God. Satan is often portrayed as a vessel and provider for the sensual and earthly pleasures, which matches the sleek manner in which he often carries himself. His promise in a way is heaven on earth, why wait and suffer, when you can have everything the heart desires right now. The price is the eternal soul, the terms agreed in an explicit or implicit pact, where Satan is infinitely wiser and more cunning. The result is demonstration that the pleasure obtained from the senses is ephemeral and ultimately unsatisfactory. The only thing that provides a deeper and fuller fulfilment has already been lost and forgone. Ultimately, it is a contest with God for the best sales pitch; everyone has the free will to choose the path to take.

²⁹ Villeneuve, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, 1008

The question is, how much can the devil be antagonized in a secular world, where there is ever decreasing belief in the afterlife and everything that can be enjoyed is in the moment. In our society consumerist and materialistic pursuits are admissible, even greatly encouraged perhaps as long as what is being sacrificed for them is not the other values that society holds dear.

Whether we consider our adversary an equal, subservient, or an inferior but yet rebellious force, the power it has to affect our decisions and way of life, decides how much that Satan, or adversary has agency in us, and how much of that sinfulness was already inherent to us without any influence.

In a world where the individual is encouraged to the point which the purpose that he or she has to find is whatever he or she sets for herself, often creates the expectation for meaning, a need to achieve a goal, and to toil in-exhaustively to achieve it.

The figure of Sisyphus is one of eternal punishment, the reasons for such a punishment are divergent, but the transgression was serious. Homer paints the arduous wrestle of Sisyphus trying to roll a massive rock into the top of a mountain, and just as he was about to achieve his goal, it would irresistibly roll back down, and the whole task would have to be repeated.³⁰ The work could never be completed; it was a story of eternal repetition and eternal failure.

This myth, as many others, permits the story of the protagonist to be used allegorically as is the case with the idea of the artist, which has at least two facets.

³⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Introduction by B. M. W. Knox New York; London: Penguin, 1997.

His commitment to an ultimately doomed task is heroic. The artist is constantly faced with this problem, even if he or she does finish the work, it rarely leaves the situation solved, there is always something left to explore, an approach not considered and the resolution unsatisfactory. The difference is that Sisyphus has eternity ahead, and the artist has to deal with the constraints of time and the inevitability of death. This however hardly can be limited to the arts. In fact I would argue that it could be placed into every facet of life. What makes this myth a tragedy in fact is the consciousness of the hero of the banality of the task, that regardless how many times the objective is attempted, it will always lead to failure. Sisyphus' awareness of his wretched fate becomes clear every time that the stone rolls back into the ground. Existence, especially without the belief in a God, has to be thought of with a modicum of absurdity. The freedom to choose a path also implies that the path has no more purpose than whatever you attribute to it, 'the absurd is sin without God.'³¹

As I previously stated I am including two artists in this essay because the visual arts are and have been key to the communication of myth and religion. The understanding of said relationship in antiquity, especially as far as it was linked to Plato was that both 'muthos' (myth) and 'eidolon' (image) were lies, or at the very least illusions and simulations.³² It was important to distrust them because it was thought as implicit to their nature as a copy, to be misleading to the model. This was

³¹ Camus, *The Plague; The Fall; Exile and the Kingdom; and Selected Essays*, 525

³² Françoise Graziani, "Discoveries", in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, 586

partly due to the fact that a considerable part of the images that were created were trying to represent the divine. This intertwines with myth, as it developed from the anthropomorphic representation of the gods. That representation of “a god was called an idol or a simulacrum: it was later to be called an icon, losing its status as a representation to that of a disputed symbol in the Byzantine Christian tradition.”³³ However, the representation of the gods raises the question of the exact nature of the relationship between the deity, and the object that is meant to represent it, has. How much if any of that divinity, can, if at all, be contained in an object, if the tangibility of it served as a necessary bridge of communication between the god and the worshiper.

One outcome of this debate is the avoidance of images. One of the most distinguishing features of the Hebrew religion is its rejection of images, while the Christian religion swayed on how much of God could be depicted, or if they should also lean towards iconoclasm, which is the belief in the destruction of icons.³⁴ The other outcome, which has been treaded since the Neo-Platonists, was the mythical image as an allegory.³⁵ Therefore the images or objects served as vessels meant to help the viewer gain access to the true; instead of rejecting them because they relied on the senses for understanding, rather acknowledging the role that the senses had to play in perceiving the images that would lead to the attainment of ideas. This of course evolved into more direct and literal representations of the myths, which

³³ Graziani, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, 587

³⁴ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/iconoclasm>

³⁵ Struck, P.T, *Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism*, In Copeland, R. & Struck, P.T. (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, 57-70. Cambridge University Press. (2010), 58

were now perceived more as stories that could be told pictorially. Up until the point when the image was perceived as pure, and relevant in its own right.

For certain works, it is important to acknowledge all this varying elements and seeing the art piece as an allegory to perhaps broader themes, but also very much an object that somehow has a life or right to exist of its own, which is very much in relation to perception of the artist as *Deus Pictor*³⁶, or Painter of the Divine, that heightens an object by the act of creation, but also the painter himself becomes divine by the act of creating.

When exposed to art the person experiencing it can fall into a sort of enchantment when they are able to forget themselves. "Things that took a long time to produce appear spontaneous, life and movement burst from what is fixed, unity is revealed in something fragmentary; and our feelings when we experience these phenomena seem to represent a form of completeness."³⁷ However, they can be more than simple escapism, when properly experienced, the sense of freedom can be greater if it can be seen that the artist made what would have otherwise been incidental, timeless.

Anselm Kiefer not only deals with myths but also questions the idea of myth and its link to history. Kiefer's beginnings were ones of contrast. The beginning of his life, and childhood, during the post-war boom that occurred in the 1950s involved a culture of collective amnesia and disassociation from National Socialism and

³⁶ Graziani, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, 592

³⁷ Max Bilen, "The Mythico-Poetic Attitude", *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel London; New York: Routledge, 1992, 862

anything reminiscent of it. The beginning of his artistic career, however, was part of a debate against the prohibitions against representation and painting, in the formalist side; and the display of German identity and the exploration of memory in the thematic, which lasted over two decades. Kiefer believed that it was necessary in the construction of a new culture to confront and acknowledge what had gone before “My thought is vertical, and one of its planes was fascism. But I see all its layers. In my paintings I tell stories in order to show what lies behind history. I make a hole and I go through.”³⁸ This confrontation involved for the Neo-Expressionists, of which Kiefer was thought of as one, depicting once again the symbols that had been indented into the psyche during the Nazi years, and subsequently repressed after its end. Things like Nazi castles, swastikas and spades, fetishes of Nazism, in a declaration that Nazism was an indelible part of German history. “I am the butcher, at least on a theoretical level, because I cannot know today what I would have done at the time. Mankind is capable of anything. That is the explanation of my affliction.”³⁹

The themes had a cyclical nature, starting with the mythical forest, turning into the civilised studio and finally into the scorched earth that was indispensable for renewal. A subject of these is that of the landscape. The German landscape is evoked, an expression of the German soul as expressed by Eric Michaud, but instead of magnifying the space to create a feeling of escape and a chance at spirituality, he makes it immersive, the objective is not to create a panoramic view to admire, as

³⁸ Andréa Lauterwein, and Anselm Kiefer. *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2007, 28

³⁹ Lauterwein, and Kiefer. *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory*, 37

much as creating a background “against which he summons up history and myth to be tried by the tribunal of memory”⁴⁰.



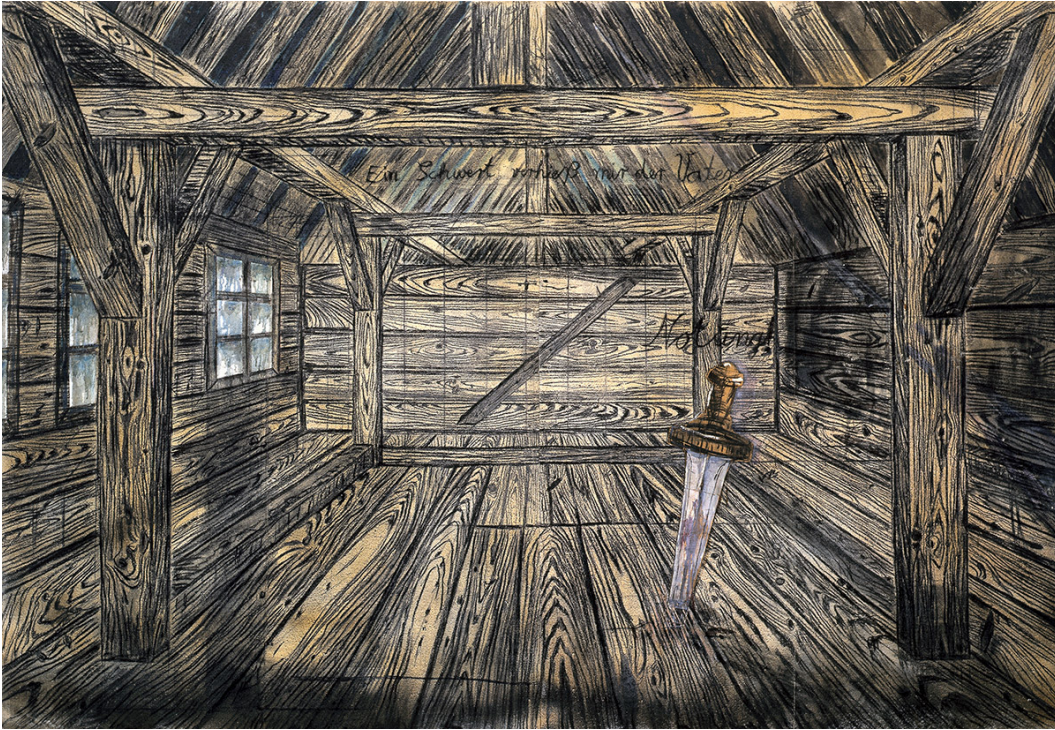
(Fig. 1)

Similarities are struck when depicting the attic. Throughout the Jewish persecution during Nazi power, they served as a hiding place for the victims, but the security of its confinement was a double-edged sword, if discovered the shelter served an equally effective purpose, as a cage from which there was no escape. Post 1945, it was a place for the semi-forgotten, a store-room for what is no longer useful; regardless of whether that is objects or memories, concepts which are itself embedded in the definition of the German word for attic, Peicher.⁴¹ By making visual

⁴⁰ Lauterwein, and Kiefer. *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory*,133

⁴¹ Lauterwein, and Kiefer. *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan: Myth, Mourning and Memory*, 40

the horror of history the artist allows the viewer to glance at the psychological dimension of its memory.



(Fig. 2)

Books are normally containers of memories and history. In his sculptures of books in the Shulamite book series (1990), amongst other examples, he explores this through the acknowledgement that books are a symbol of the achievements of mankind, let that be in religion or in science, their purpose is to contain that knowledge outside of a single person, it is a form of communication, which travels across the barriers not only of space, but also of time, speaking from generation to generation, forming collective memories. Otherwise memory decays, and history disappears; this is something that he makes obvious in choosing oxidized lead in the choice of its pages, that books are more effective tools against the passing of time.



(Fig. 3)

With every image it is important to realize the influence that myth has on it, both visually and conceptually. Through alterations, condensation and ultimately representation, they bring to light underlying desires which can be accessed, through interpretation, similarly to how dreams are, their ethical standing mostly provides a tool for understanding, whatever historical subject and/or psychological state is behind it.

The interactions that occur within the human psyche and how they translated into the outside world becomes the basis of past, current and future mythologies. *After ALife Ahead* is an assessment of relations. The work created for Skulptur Projekter Münster is a play on the interactions of a planned system, with the random

occurrences that happen as time lapses. He is creating an environment, the viewer can observe said environment, it may even affect said environment, but the environment is not dependent, or even remotely subservient to the viewer, the viewer is only one element at play.



(Fig. 4)

It is a rink in an abandoned, soon-to-be demolished building; it contains dirt, water, simple and complex organisms. The mechanical systems arranged by the artist are based from hints found in nature. The glass gateway to the elements is controlled by a score based-off from the patterns of a sea snail that lives in the environment. The affectation that this may have on the environment is captured by cables and sensors under the soil, which record Co2, temperature, the bacteria or bees which are correlated to the capacity for life that the environment has. This information is

subsequently processed by an incubator of cancer cells, which divide at a rate determined by these external factors. Once they reach a certain size they become manifest in a metastasis of the pattern on the ceiling, visible through an augmented reality display that viewers can access through downloadable apps on their phones. The cells themselves affect the pattern of the tank appearance and the aperture of the ceiling after they achieve a certain level of fitness, further affecting their environment and the future results.⁴² “What you have there is really a network of self-organizing systems. They are in constant displacement. They grow, they evolve, they shift, there’s no master-slave in that regard. They shift constantly.”⁴³

The experience of this work questions the centrality of the human position, by making the human indiscernible and highlighting the unpredictability of his surroundings. *After A Life Ahead* allows only certain elements within human control, and, reflecting that even when indeed there are elements that can be controlled through logic, what’s more, those structured interventions often carry consequences that couldn’t have been foreseen from the outset.

When elements are placed together with the systems the result will be the possibility of the creation of a symbiosis between the different components. The symbiosis can reach the point where the boundaries between the components are blurred, even lost, but not to disappear as much as to transform, mutate, and fuse.

⁴²Russeth, Andrew, “Constant Displacement: Pierre Huyghe on His Work at Skulptur Projekte Münster”, *ARTNEWS*, Published 26/06/17
<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/pierre-huyghe-creates-sci-fi-landscape-in-munster>

⁴³ Ibid

“I am interested in how to quantify the different variations of being alive...how to intensify the presence of things.”⁴⁴

These characteristics can also be found in human interactions, what Huyghe wants is testing a modern personal agency, in which a person is able to act and create original experiences, with no-knowledge zones where the thought process only plays a catalytic role, but there is no underlying system of knowledge constituted. This can translate into something as ordinary as the activities that people engage in everyday, it pumps society with a vitality created by the perpetual inventions and unsigned creations that form culture at large.

Perhaps the myths aforementioned can do more than explain our present condition. In this day and age they can be seen as normative myths, which often aim more to a future to be realized. ‘People not only expect myths to provide them with an explanation of the world or a pattern for living in it; they also hope that mythical narratives will enable them to envisage a condition beyond the finite existence to which they themselves are subjected.’⁴⁵

Agreeing with Camus, the fundamental question in philosophy is whether or not a life is worth living.⁴⁶ My statement is that the myth of the 21st century, is happiness through progress. It’s bound to the 21st century not because happiness wasn’t sought before, but because, despite of what we know happiness is still sought in very much the same way.

⁴⁴ Huyghe, Pierre, “*Pierre Huyghe*”, Artsy, Accessed: 27/03/18

<https://www.artsy.net/artist/pierre-huyghe/works>

⁴⁵ Bilen, *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, 861-2

⁴⁶ Camus, *The Plague; The Fall; Exile and the Kingdom; and Selected Essays*, 495

Don Juan dies at the hands of a ghost as punishment for his perceived transgressions against women in Zorrilla's version of the story.⁴⁷ Camus imagines perhaps an even bleaker end, where he sees him past his youth buried in a monastery punished by age and not having died at the right time, living a sad and ascetic life that directly contrasted his previous life devoted to sexual pleasure.⁴⁸

Don Jose kills Carmen's husband and lovers, until he ends up killing her when he cannot conquer and dominate her,⁴⁹ the desperation and anger towards what he perceives as her greed for wanting endless lovers, blinds him to his own greed of wanting to possess another human being. Finally, Don Jose possessed her corpse, but he was not able to possess her spirit, and lost the possibility of having her as part of his life.

Faust engages in the same problem, his quest is for knowledge through research, when that fails, like Carmen and Don Juan he attempts knowledge through life, his call for Mephistopheles even engages elements that an earthly life couldn't provide. Only after years of endless exploration he realizes that "as the ultimate truth we human creatures know: He only earns his freedom, life itself, who daily strives to conquer it anew."⁵⁰ That moment is the moment he wants to prolong just a second longer, an instant later he dies. Even though he loses the wager on the last minute,

⁴⁷ Zorrilla, and Gómez, *Don Juan Tenorio*, 253

⁴⁸ Camus, *The Plague; The Fall; Exile and the Kingdom; and Selected Essays*, 554

⁴⁹Merimee, Prosper. *Carmen*. Translated by Lady Mary Lloyd. The Gutenberg Project Ebook #2465, 2016

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2465/2465-h/2465-h.htm>

⁵⁰ Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy: Parts One and Two Fully Revised*, 11934

the angels rescue him because “who strives, and keeps on striving still, for him there is salvation.”⁵¹

Quetzalcoatl was a bringer of culture, of technology which is the ultimate harbour of faith left, that the next invention will bring us closer to our goal, done through technology, chiefly medicine. Most things in science are done for the betterment of our condition at least that’s how they are pitched when funding is required and The Gilgamesh Project⁵² will ensure that further developments succeed in debates as to its desirability, but Quetzalcoatl’s story warns against the threats of progress.

This brings us into Satan, or any opponent and aggressor that blocks our way into happiness. If only that barrier could be removed then Eden and Paradise would be granted. Yet, it is important to remember that Satan can only lead us to temptation, whether we fall or not depends on us.

Finally, we come into Sisyphus, the hero of the absurd, who pushes that rock, never succeeding, eternally repeating his task. We emphasize on the realization of his predicament. Sure, the whole exercise seems terribly pointless, his purpose can never be fulfilled, and yet, that same realization frees him. He has to push that rock, yes, he will never reach the top, no, but failure is partly removed, when the possibility of success is also removed, and so are the pressure and torture of failure when the very boundaries between failure and success disappear.

Kiefer allows us to see the power that history has in shaping our thoughts, our mind and perceptions. The lessons that it teaches and the way those lessons are

⁵¹ Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy: Parts One and Two Fully Revised*, 12300

⁵² Yuval N., Harari, and John Purcell, Translator. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind*. 2015, 414

transmuted and transformed constantly in the present, seen with the benefit of hindsight. Pierre Huyghe on the other hand, gives us environments without the total weight of human agency, at least without its absolute control, removing that egocentric responsibility we possess as creators, but without removing the one we have as participants capable of affecting our surroundings.

The Buddhist faith discourages the pursuit of ephemeral pleasures because they argue that when they are obtained after all the strife, they are short-lived, even during their peak there is fear of loss, and desire for more.⁵³ But with happiness it is important to realize that it is deeply engrained to our genetic make-up. In the selfish gene, Richard Dawkins argues that 'the fundamental unit, the prime mover of all life, is the replicator'⁵⁴, that replicator, now commonly known as genes has been shaped and is constantly shaped by the way in which it exists to replicate, for humans this translates into our genes' very reason for existence and sole purpose being for us humans to do what is necessary, to not rest, until our seed is passed on, and even then.

Where does this leave me, that for years I have been interested in the idea of purpose in my work? Even if happiness is momentary, suffering is an evil very real and worth combating. That is the strife, by no means to give up, to fight, to experience, to fail, but to understand that living in itself is a success, and define and alter my objectives as my life progresses.

⁵³ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*. OPUS Y. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998, 68-74

⁵⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. 30th Anniversary ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 264

The endless efforts to improve ourselves through science could be, so far through, biological engineering, or the engineering of inorganic life. Taken far enough we could approach a singularity where everything that we know now might not even be understandable to the next generation, and everything that happens after it wouldn't be understandable to this one. Dr Harari ends his book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by communicating to the reader that the real question is 'what do we want to want?'⁵⁵ To finish my essay I ask why do we want to want?

⁵⁵ Yuval N. Harari, and John Purcell, Translator. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind*. 2015.

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Images

(Fig. 1)

(Anselm Kiefer - The Master Singers - Oil, acrylic, emulsion, straw and pieces of cardboard on canvas - 280 x 380 cm - 1982)

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/anselm-kiefer-die-meistersinger-the-mastersingers>

(Fig. 2)

(Anselm Kiefer – Nothung – Charcoal and oil on burlap with inserted charcoal drawing on cardboard 300.5 x 435.5 cm – 1973)

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/anselms-alchemy>

(Fig. 3)

(Anselm Kiefer, Untitled (Secret Life of Plants) Mixed media on lead – 100.3 x 135.9 x 135.9 cm – 2004)

<https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/23531/Anselm-Kiefer-Untitled-Secret-Life-of-Plants>

(Fig.4)

(Pierre Huyghe, After A Life Ahead – Installation – 2017)

<http://www.artnews.com/2017/06/26/constant-displacement-pierre-huyghe-on-his-work-at-skulptur-projekte-munster-2017>