

Dionysian Inspiration: The Contribution of Classical Reception Studies Methodology to the Interpretation of Current Curatorial Concepts

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Abstract

The postmodern state of mind was defined by theorists such as Fredric Jameson as a-historical, and today's society as "bereft of all historicity and denies its past which is modified into a vast collection of images and thus effaced altogether". However, and from an approach contrasting a-historicism, the following study employs Classical Reception Studies as a comparative methodology in the analysis of contemporary art. The study bears an inter-disciplinary character, presenting four recent exhibitions as a case study, inspired by and interpreted with reference to Dionysian myths, literary documents and philosophical sources. Three of the exhibitions were exhibited in Tel Aviv between 2013-2014: Carrara Syndrome by the artist Zohar Gotesman; Tigers by the artist Jossef Krispel; and Mysteria by the artist Dor Confino. The fourth exhibition, Climax, was a dance-performance choreographed by Yasmeeen Godder, displayed as part of the exhibition Set in Motion at the Petach-Tikva Museum of Art.²

Keywords: Classical reception studies, postmodernism, Dionysian mysteries, metamorphosis, pagan rituals

Introduction

The accumulation of knowledge as the main focus of an artistic discourse was presented at the 2013 Venice Biennale, titled "The Encyclopedic Palace". The interest in historical knowledge naturally encompasses Classical culture as an immanent part of western culture.

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Classical Reception Studies is a field that researches the features and implications of Classical culture and concepts in contemporary culture. Such Classical reflections are not necessarily positive but can also be subversive and antagonistic (Hardwick, 2003; Martindale and Thomas, 2006; Hardwick and Stray, 2008; Morley, 2009; Hardwick and Harrison, 2013).

The present study posits the use of Classical Reception Studies, however, as a methodology, employing a comparative strategy in the analysis of contemporary art inspired directly or indirectly by Classical culture. The premise underling this research is that references to ancient textual and visual sources may foster new insights and contribute to our understanding of contemporary art and culture. The study case for this research comprises four recent exhibitions, three of which were exhibited in Tel Aviv between 2103-2014: *Carrara Syndrome* by the artist Zohar Gotesman; *Tigers* by the artist Jossef Krispel; *Mysteria* by the artist Dor Confino; and *Climax* - a dance-performance choreographed by Yasmeen Godder and exhibited as part of the exhibition "Set in Motion" at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art. The artists of the first two exhibitions - *Carrara Syndrome* and *Tigers* - were inspired directly by Classical ideas while the curatorship of the exhibition *Mysteria* was based upon Classical concepts. Finally, the dance-performance *Climax* will be interpreted here employing a Classical Reception Studies methodology. The analysis as a whole is based upon Dionysian myths and cult, with reference to literary and philosophical sources.

Carrara Syndrome

The solo exhibition by Zohar Gotesman, titled *Carrara Syndrome* (Rosenfeld gallery, Tel Aviv, March 2013, curated by Yael Frank) saliently inspired by the Classical spirit, was created by an artist who had trained in Italy in traditional-Classical sculpting methods. Gotesman has a dual relationship with the Classics: he adores and is inspired by them, but he also seeks to destroy them. This relationship is embodied in the exhibition in an illuminated photograph positioned on the floor (fig. 1), in which the artist himself can be seen lying on the ground and embracing the back of a marble female image he has sculpted.



Figure 1: Zohar Gotesman, Untitled, 2013, color print, 133 X 200 cm, Photo: Tom Bookstein, courtesy of the artist

The original statue did not feature in the exhibition and the photograph functions as a kind of Platonic reflection. On several occasions the artist has declared his hypothetical wish to be united with the sculpture and become one with the image. This wish seems to allude to the Platonic yearning expressed in the *Phaedrus* dialogue in regard to the parable of the yearning of the soul to be united with the divine. As the story tells, before the soul was incarnated in a corporeal body she dwelt among the divinities and witnessed their sublime beauty; however, when the soul entered the physical world and was incarnated, she forgot those glorious sights. Since then whenever the soul finds beauty in another being she experiences a dim memory of the sights that she had once seen, and this fills her with great emotion and a passionate love for that being. This love stems from the longing for divine beauty and the wish to merge with it (Plato, *Phaedrus*, line 251; Plato, *The Symposium*, line 203a; Hadot, 2002, p. 47). It was the actual impossibility of becoming one with a sculpture that interested the artist; and, by implication, this would seem to symbolize the salient postmodern scepticism and loss of faith (Jameson, 1992, pp. 25-31).

Gotesman's engagement with the marble female sculpture might also suggest the myth of Pygmalion, who fell in love with the female image he had created (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, lines 10.243-297). However, and differing from the myth, Gotesman declared his intention to throw the statue into the sea, back to Aphrodite's realm, as the climax of an extravagant ceremonial performance. This symbolic-hypothetical act of intentionally throwing away a pseudo-Classical image accords with the postmodern state of mind of an a-historical society, bereft of all historicity and denying its past, as Fredric Jameson defines it: "whose putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles", and whose past is modified into a vast collection of images and thus effaced altogether. History remains out of reach and we are condemned to seek it by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history (Jameson, 1992, pp. 18, 25). However, the act of throwing the statue into the sea has yet not been carried out, and this in itself is a statement and raises questions concerning the value of history and specifically of the Classics: is Classical culture indeed comparable to a delicate and fragile female figure? Is it really possible to throw out Classical culture or History as a whole? Is it more valuable than what has been considered to date? The dual relationship of Gotesman with the Classics is embedded also in images that were corrupted by the artist himself in what would seem to have been as a subversive act. An extremely blatant mode of this corruption could be seen in a marble bust of Caesar Titus (fig. 2), carved by the artist and sprayed all over with a yellow phosphorescent paint.



Figure 2: Zohar Gotesman, *Amor Ac Deliciae Generis Humani* (Titus Flavius Vespasianus), 2013, marble, polyurethane and phosphoric color, 64 x 50 x 22 cm, Photo: Tom Bookstein, courtesy of the artist

This act would seem again to reflect the dual attitude of the artist towards the Classics: on the one hand, a salient affinity to Antiquity for, after all, he had bothered to sculpt in marble an image of the emperor; while on the other hand, a kind of postmodern scepticism is manifested in the intentional corruption. It should be noted that, as an artist affiliated with the Classics, Gotesman is well acquainted with Classical sources, such as Josephus Flavius's *The Jewish War*, and others, stemming from his desire to study the culture to which he is attracted and also disapproving. After he had moulded the statue out of materials such as clay, gypsum and marble, he then shattered it to pieces as an iconoclastic act. The yellow material effectively function to glue together the fractures, and thus the artist became the restorer of the work that he himself had destroyed. On the back of the sculpture he inscribed a citation from Titus's biography by Suetonius: *Amor Ac Deliciae Generis Humani*. This phrase may also reflect the artist's dichotomous relationship with the Classics, for Titus was a great oppressor of the Jews, while still one of the most adored rulers of his time, as suggested by his epithet – The Divine (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, line 8. b) This dichotomy becomes even more extreme in a curved sculpture of the Three Graces (fig. 3), peculiarly positioned on a table covered with a red and white checkered cloth.



Figure 3: Zohar Gotesman, *Cheesy Sculpture*, 2013, parmesan cheese, 40 X 40 X 23 cm each, Photo: Tom Bookstein, courtesy of the artist

The Three Graces are portrayed with inclined heads and sensually closed eyes. Such pathos could have drawn serious attention from the viewers, who found out to their surprise, however, that what would have seemed at first to be a Classical marble sculpture was revealed as an image sculpted out of parmesan cheese that spread its aroma throughout the building. During the gala opening event of the exhibition the guests were given focaccia bread and parmesan sliced directly from the sculpture itself. Thus, the statue that had been carved by means of hard work was nonchalantly partially destroyed by an act that poignantly symbolized the dichotomous attitude of Gotesman towards the Classics, while somewhat reflecting the character of contemporary culture and habits. The use of odd and unpredictable materials no longer surprises anyone on the contemporary art scene. However, the use of an edible substance in order to make a seemingly Classical image still preserved the affinity to the Classics in its subject matter, while at the same time employing a tactic of temptation by means of taste and odour that made the gala guests destroyers. This mastication of a pseudo-Classical sculpture, and its intense odour could perhaps be conceived as a metaphor of the Classics as chewed up and mouldy. It might also be interpreted as a statement emphasizing the temporal and consumable nature of contemporary art, as against the longevity of Classical art. The use of a sensual material was also applied in another work on display in this exhibition, also combining the strange smell of an edible material with texture. This was an image of a Classical athlete (fig. 4) resembling the *Diadomenos*, a 5th-century image of a youth crowning himself with a victor's Olympic wreath, referred to by Classical art historian Andrew Stewart as "a soft youth" (Stewart, 1990, p. 162).³

³ It should be noted that the artist did not have the *Diadomenos* in mind while working on this sculpture.

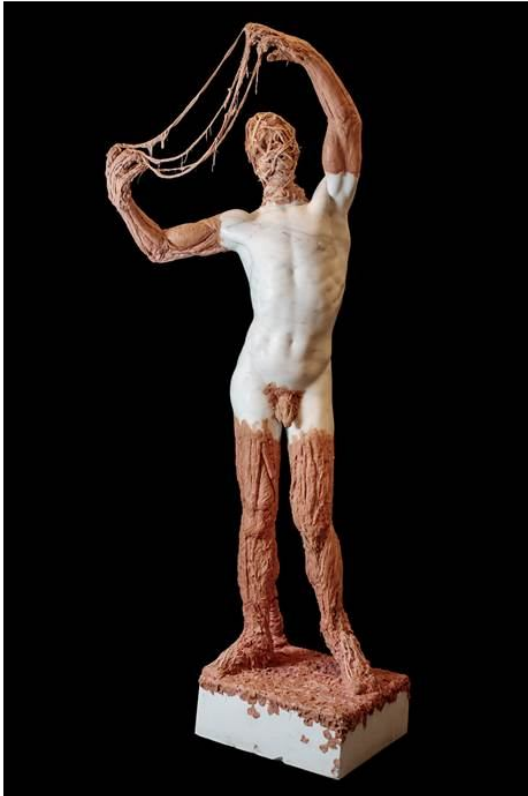


Figure 4: Zohar Gotesman, *Chewed Material*, 2013, marble and 4000 Bazooka chewing gums, 220 X 80 X 40 cm, Photo: Tom Bookstein, courtesy of the artist

While the original classical sculpture was of bronze, and its Roman copy of marble, the postmodern sculpture was composed partly of marble and partly of a large amount of chewing gum: the torso was of Carrara marble, while the head, limbs and genitals were made of chewing gum (Gotesman used 20 kg, constitutes about 4000 pieces donated to him by a candy manufacturer). The metaphor of a chewed-up and recycled culture is thus salient, particularly due to the use of chewing gum. This transformation recalls the metamorphosis of Pygmalion's Galatea from ivory into flesh and blood. However, rather than becoming an image of a handsome young boy, as a parallel to Galatea, Gotesman's marble torso metamorphoses into a sticky material, as a kind of decay that melts and spreads from the marble and might constitute a metaphor for the culture that renounces the Classics and the breakdown in the signifying chain (Jameson, 1992, pp. 25-31). This postmodern-sceptical approach is supported by Jameson's statement that a good parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original (Jameson, 2009, p. 4).

However, Gotesman has created here a pastiche, to use another term employed by Jameson, by speaking in a dead language and by creating an imitation of another style devoid of any attempt to cause laughter (Jameson, 2009, pp. 4-5). Aspects of melting and softening characterize the metamorphosis of Ovid's protagonists, as noted by Leonard Barkan (1986, p. 77) and reinforced by Victor I. Stoichita (2008, p. 18). Stoichita also notes that the red-white contrast appears at least twice during the Pygmalion story: in the scene in which the sculptor lays the ivory maiden out on the purple coverlet; and the contrasted red and white through the opposition of figure to ground, in the episode of the sacrifice (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, lines 10. 267, 272). By becoming flesh out of ivory, and by the melting of white into red, the simulacrum becomes life (Stoichita, 2008, p. 20).

However, in Gotesman's young athlete's image the simulacrum remains, as the marble has become a substance extremely detached from reality. While the image of the Three Graces is smooth and resembles marble, the surface of the athlete's limbs, head and genitals recalls flayed and exposed flesh. The corporeality of this image echoes a phrase in Plato's *Timaeus* that is remarkably apt for the corporeality of this chewing-gum athlete: "[...] He who modeled us, considering these things, mixed earth with fire and water and blended them, and making a ferment of acid and salt, he mingled it with them and formed soft band succulent flesh" (Plato, *Timaeus*, line 74a-d). It declares that the flesh was designed to protect against scorching heat and cold and to protect the bones. Thus the artist becomes a pseudo-demiurge, whose creation is a fake and will never resemble the glorious creation of the Creator. This seeming arrogance of the artist is also demonstrated in the contrast between the Classical Greek athlete statue from the fifth century BCE, who is bowing his head modestly in *aidos* to avoid the sin of *hubris* (Stewart, 1990, p. 162), whereas Gotesman's athlete arrogantly thrusts out his chest and head, and thus his stance becomes pathetic and ridiculous. Here too, the artist's ambivalent attitude towards the Classics is very salient. From a broader perspective, the Classics themselves could have provided the source for this ambivalent attitude, since the motif of distortion, extinction and resurrection is profound in mythology and cult and connected with Dionysus's myth of tearing apart by the Titans. But Dionysus was reborn and became a mighty divinity whose savagery is part of his substance (Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, VI, 162-210). Dionysus's death and rebirth in Antiquity were considered by the Christian church as a prototype of the Eucharist, the death and resurrection of Jesus (Mathews, 1999, p. 45; Weitzman, 1979, p.128). The same exhibition by Zohar Gotesman also featured two wooden images that resembled Christian martyrs or relics (figs. 5, 6).



Figure 5: Zohar Gotesman, Jericho 9mm, 2013, burnt and fired wood, 70 X 53 X 30 cm, March 2013, Photo: Tom Bookstein, courtesy of the artist



Figure 6: Zohar Gotesman, 200°C or 1150°C, 2013, burnt and fired wood and bronze, 190 X 40 X20 cm, Photo: Tom Bookstein, courtesy of the artist

One of these was hung upside down while the other remained upright, both with limbs torn and distorted. The two images were situated in front of the chewing gum athlete, as two symbols of human history. Tearing apart and rebirth are symbols of the process of *catharsis*, cleansing and purification. In this respect, the chewing gum and the parmesan cheese could be interpreted as symbols of metamorphosis and restoration. The metamorphosis – from marble to cheese or from marble to chewing gum – could be interpreted as a kind of process of mutation leading to rebirth. However, the newborn in this case is actually a superficial representation of one material by another, which is more a kind of decadence and decline than a catharsis. This has precedence in the first century CE poetic essay, the *Satyricon*, by the Roman poet Petronius. One of the episodes describes the food served during an extravagant banquet: quince in the shape of sea urchins, plums and pomegranates in the shape of flames, a Pegasus-like winged rabbit, pork and goose surrounded by fish and fowl, etc. (Petronius, *The Satyricon*, line 40).

Nothing is displayed in its original shape, everything is an imitation, a *simulacrum* – an image that both represents and constitutes reality, existing and not existing simultaneously, a copy without a source (Baudrillard, 1981; Deleuze, 1990, pp. 253-279; Lucretius, lines 4.25-35, 4.88-89). Jameson's words reflect this approach: "Hence, once again, pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (Jameson, 2009, p. 7). Gotesman's images seem to match Jameson's definition of one of the main features of postmodernism as the transformation of reality into images (Jameson, 2009, p. 20). Jameson denotes contemporary culture as schizophrenic and characterized by a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers (Jameson, 1992, p. 26). The transformation of the signifiers in Gotesman's athlete image constitutes a metaphor for an abrupt transformation of historical phases: the marble, as the signifier of the Classics, transforms into the fluid and undisciplined chewing gum, as the signifier of contemporary culture.

This transition is hallucinatory, like a schizophrenic experience, and evokes the hallucinatory fragmented episodes of the *Satyricon* protagonists Encolpius and Ascyltus, who move from one experience to another, in a boundless, lascivious, lust-filled world, like a nightmare (Petronius, *Satyricon*; See also Federico Fellini's film, 1969).

The inexhaustible quantity of dubious delicacies and eroticism in the *Satyricon* becomes oppressive; there is no end to the low feeling, the suffering and anxiety and dissolution of reality. Gotesman's athlete's chewing gum limbs seem corporeal and bloody, abject and decadent, perhaps coinciding with the decadent scenes in the *Satyricon*, such as Trimalchio's report of his intestinal condition and his statement that rotten meat stimulates the culture of worms (Petronius, *Satyricon*, lines 47, 57). The strong presence of abjection in the Roman spirit is summed up in Juvenal's statement – *Vomunt ut Edunt, Edunt ut Vomant*, and seems to be embodied in Gotesman's chewing-gum image (Juvenal, *The Satires*, VI lines 425-433; Martial, *Epigrams*, VII lines 67, 9-10). According to Julia Kristeva, debris and impurities are removed in order to allow the continuation of life (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3).

However, the denominator between *Satyricon's* spirit and the postmodern would seem rather, to be the adherence to the abject and the breakdown of temporality, as Jameson defines, which creates an overwhelming material sensory experience with feelings of anxiety and loss of reality (Jameson, 1992, p. 27). Gotesman's images – the chewing-gum athlete and the parmesan cheese Graces - associate the ancient Roman spirit with the gluttony of contemporary society for endless stimuli and excitement. Jameson notes the new kind of society that emerged following World War Two, defined by him as a consumer society and characterized, amongst other things, by new types of consumption and planned obsolescence (Jameson, 2009, p. 19). Guy Debord has defined contemporary society as a spectacle society, in which the spectacle is its goal and its main production and the language of spectacle consists of the signs of production (Debord, 1967, p. 32). The chewing gum in Gotesman's work is a salient characteristic of a production material symbolizing the goals of this society – intermittent cycles of production and consumption. Thus, the two contrasting materials, marble and chewing gum, suggest a kind of alienation as a metaphor for the contemporary alienated spectacle society.

As a contemporary statement that encounters an ancient Roman state of mind with a postmodern spectacle society, reality and art, respectively, are also insufficient and there is a need to create ever more stimuli, passionate illusions and hedonistic sights. This suggests the Roman principle of *Panem et Circenses* that characterized Roman society, and thus raises an analogy. *Panem et Circenses* was a policy established by Emperor Augustus in the first century BCE and was aimed at providing regular cheap nourishment and plenty of entertainment for the masses.

The benefits included a monthly distribution of basic products in the Portico of Minucius that ensured the public welfare, and performances in the forum, stadiums and amphitheatres. The emperor's aim by this policy was to pacify and satisfy the demands of the masses and thus to prevent their revolt or intervention in state affairs, and to strengthen his rule. The poet Juvenal summarizes the atmosphere in his time with the words: "For the people, who once bestowed authority, army commands, consulships, and everything else, today keep their hands to themselves and for just two things do they eagerly yearn: bread and the games" (Juvenal, *The Satires*, X. 77-81; Carcopino, 2003, pp. 202-212, 239-243). Thus, the exhibition *Syndrome Carrara* elicits a discussion of the nature of the *panem and circenses* mood in what has been defined as today's consumer society and its constant pursuit of new stimuli; a society that exploits a subversive use of a "dead language" that abuses the Classics on behalf of a-historicism state of mind. As a subversive consequence, the images could be conceived as emphasizing the temporal and consumed nature of contemporary art as against the longevity of Classical art.

Tigers

The reference to the predatory customs in the Roman arena connects to the following discussion, on an exhibition titled *Tigers* by the artist Jossef Krispel (Noga Gallery, Tel Aviv, April 2013; followed by a text by Itzak Livne). Three passionate iconic personalities were the focus of this exhibition: Pablo Picasso, David Bowie and Dionysus. The first two have become a myth in their own lifetime, while the third is, naturally, mythological. The title "Tigers" reflects the variegated characters of these personalities and the postmodern-varicoloured character of the exhibition as a whole (fig. 7).



Figure 7: Jossel Krispel, "Tigers", Installation view, Noga Gallery, Tel Aviv, April 2013.
Photo: Elad Sarig, courtesy of the artist

I relate here to the phenomenon of metamorphosis, which was a dominant feature in this exhibition and is explained in its context as a manifestation of the freedom to change shape and identity as a means of deception (Livne, 2013). Metamorphosis, which is a dominant and frequent theme in Classical mythology, is a manipulative-deceptive act frequently performed by the gods. By changing their guise in diversified manners, the gods appear and come into contact with mortals and affect their lives in the physical world. Metamorphosis is a situation that elicits a sense of wonderment and amazement, a kind of holy conundrum, as defined by Barkan (1986, pp. 19, 37). He also notes that Dionysus, even more than the other Olympians, is the quintessentially metamorphic divinity who was frequently seen as both the creator and the subject of mysterious transformations. This god has a highly significant place in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in being the deity responsible for a state of half-prophetic, half-destructive madness. The state of temporary insanity attained by means of Dionysian rites was meant to produce an atmosphere of sublime confusion and an illusion of merging with the divine (Barkan, 1986, p. 38; Meyer, 1987, pp. 63-65).

The Dionysian rites were accompanied by cries and incantatory repetition of the god's epithets, as described by Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 4. 9-16).

Those epithets reflect the god's versatility as a figure of overwhelming multiplicity. The incantations and the entire ritualistic situation are metamorphic, blurring boundaries and evoking an atmosphere of transition (Barkan, 1986, p. 39). The Dionysian procession depicted in ancient art was meant to embody Dionysus's multiplicity and role as a saviour of souls, and reflects the metamorphosis through the sanctification and initiation rituals destined to promise salvation and everlasting happiness after death (Cole, 2003, pp. 193-194, 197-199, 205; Burkert, 1987, pp. 12, 18-24; Bianchi, 1976, pp. 3-7, 13-15; Meyer, 1987, pp. 63-65; Nilsson, 1975, pp. 123, 130, 131). One of the works shown in the exhibition *Tigers* was that of a monochromatic black and white painting of a Dionysian procession (fig. 8) that seems pale and vague, as if an echo of a distant memory.



Figure 8: Jossel Krispel, Untitled (Dionysus travel back from Asia), 2013, oil on canvas, 145 x 175 cm, photo: Jossel Krispel, courtesy of the artist

Indeed, this kind of procession evokes the Dionysian processions portrayed in ancient Roman mosaics. Among the prominent Dionysian processions are mosaic floors from northern Africa (Dunbabin, 1971, pp. 52-65; Dunbabin, 1978, pp. 174-181; Blanchard-Lemee, 1996, pp. 97-101).

One of the most prominent such mosaic, visually close to that depicted by Krispel, is the procession from Sousse.⁴ The Dionysian procession was intended to sanctify and designed according to a fixed scheme: Dionysus himself mounted on a wild animal such as a tiger or lion, accompanied by his retinue composed of the maenads and the satyrs, and devices that symbolized in Antiquity his triumph as a great divinity who brings salvation to his followers. Such images, which appear in the ancient mosaics as well as in Krispel's work, include the wreath crowning Dionysus and the *thyrsus* he holds, which is the initiate's rod. Dionysus in Krispel's work also holds a mask, which is a salient ritualistic Dionysian object that features mostly on Greek amphorae and goblets. The mask symbolized the constant presence of the god (Frontisi-Ducroux, 1989, pp. 152-156).

On the mosaic, Dionysus is accompanied by his retinue, the satyrs and maenads, who are celebrating by dancing (*oreibasia*), playing the double flute (*aulos*) that produced shrill and loud sounds, knocking the *krotala* and drumming the tambourine (Landels, 1999, pp. 24-26; Kondoleon, 1995, pp. 195-196; Kerényi, 1976, pp. 368-369, 375-376; Foster, 2001, p. 43).

One of the satyrs behind Dionysus holds an object that might be for burning incense, or perhaps it is a *liknon*, the basket that served originally as a sieve for wheat grain and as a ritual device that symbolized the purification of the soul; and thus the god as the saviour (*Liber*) (Nilsson, 1987, pp. 21-22, 36-38|). The ritual then became an ecstatic turmoil or *pandemonium* intended to release the initiates from their corporeal being and lead them into a state of *enthusiasmos* – an illusion of merging with the divine, expressing the madness that takes over the initiates (Meyer, 1987, pp. 63-65; Sorell, 1973, p. 51; Frontisi-Ducroux, 1989, pp. 154, 156; Otto, 1965, p. 92).

The question that arises in light of the broad implications of the Dionysian procession in the ancient world is – what is the significance of a Dionysian procession depicted by a contemporary artist? The pallid appearance and somewhat vagueness of the work, in contrast to the vividness and solidity of the ancient Roman mosaics, may provide the answer. The artist himself named the image “the living dead” and perceived it as a phantasm or ghost imprisoned in the canvas (Krispel, 2004).

⁴ 450X400cm, Sousse museum, in Blanchard-Lemee, 1995, Fig. 64. See also: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dionysus.jpg>

This suggests Platonic and Neoplatonic concepts of the imprisonment of the soul in corporeality (Plato, *Phaedo*, lines 65-67; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, lines 4.8). Yearning for a divine Platonic memory could also be seen in two other works in the exhibition – “Herakles with an alter ego and a Dionysian mask” (fig. 9) and “Dionysus tames a tiger” (fig 10), which display pink and azure splashes sprayed all over the drawings, making the images seem a dim reflection of memory: for the desired unification with the divine has failed and remained a distant and unfulfilled wish in a sceptical world in which there is no god with whom to merge.



Figure 9: Jossef Krispel, Herakles and alter ego with a Dionysian mask, 2013, 59 X 38.5 cm, watercolor pencil and acrylic on canvas, photo: Jossef Krispel, courtesy of the artist



Figure 10: Jossef Krispel, Untitled, (Dionysus tames a tiger), 59 X 38.5 cm, 2013, watercolor pencil and acrylic on canvas, photo: Jossef Krispel, courtesy of the artist

Krispel's work oscillates between a longing for a constant and structured existence associated with a distant past and a deconstructed, detached and devastated existence (Omer, 2009, p. 9). The craving for a utopian existence alongside the awareness of its absence engenders the insatiable hunger that underlies Krispel's artistic work. This is reflected in Diotima's description of *Eros* as the son of poverty and affluence; hence, he is poor and constantly in search of plenty, but what he gains persistently escapes him (Plato, *The Symposium*, line 204). Krispel expresses this in reflecting upon his artistic preoccupation: "That which appears, appears only in order to disappear, and then reappears – only to disappear again. The painting appears, disappears, reappears and is erased time and again until the finished painting presents something else" (Krispel, 2004, 24). This ghostlike appearance is also postmodern, for, as John Caputo puts it: "[...] in postmodern theology we believe in ghosts" (Caputo and Vattimo, 2007, p. 50). Likewise, prayer is to nobody, asserts Jacques Derrida, since the absence of god is immanent in it: "[...] I would go so far to say there should be a moment of atheism in the prayer. The possibility that the god doesn't answer, doesn't exist [...] You have to accept the hypothesis that you may pray for no one, for nothing" (Shapiro, Govrin, Derrida, 2001, pp. 63-65).

Caputo expresses Derrida's loss of faith: "Derrida writes by looking up to heaven [...] But with this difference, Derrida's look is cast not toward heaven but toward the future... unable to see a thing [...] lacking divine foresight" (Caputo, 1997, pp. 328-329). Krispel's Dionysian procession has thus metamorphosed into a pale and tenuous memory of times when a belief in salvation still existed. Even the solidity of the mosaic technique of the Roman procession depictions can be conceived as a metaphor for the then solid faith in the existence of the divine. Another feature of a postmodern Dionysian metamorphosis was embodied in the image of David Bowie (fig. 11), "the artist with a thousand faces", as corresponding to the versatility of Dionysus.



Figure 11: Jossel Krispel, Untitled (Diamond Dog), 2013, oil on canvas, diptych, 100 X 85 cm each canvas, photo: Jossel Krispel, courtesy of the artist

"There is some of the Dionysian in the virtuosity with which David Bowie plays around with his characters, sexual identities and colourfulness", asserted the painter Itzak Livne in the exhibition's accompanying text, equating Bowie with the constant changes and transformations of Dionysus as the god of metamorphosis. Livne asked: "What or who hides behind David Bowie's thousand masks?" (Livne, 2013).

The common denominator between the three personalities who are the focus of this exhibition is their liberty to strip off or acquire different shapes, to change styles and to reinvent frequently: in other words, constantly to metamorphose. Metamorphosis might thus be considered as a cross-border feature of these mythological, in the broad sense, personalities.

Bowie was depicted as a hybrid creature whose upper body is human and his lower body beast-like. This appearance recalls the Centaur, a creature belonging to the Dionysian milieu. The Centaur was considered in Antiquity as a liminal creature that embodied the sin of hubris, and as a wild and aggressive creature lacking in moderation (*Sophrosine*) and self-control (*Enkrateia*) (Homer, *Odyssey*, lines 21.289-315). The myth of the accommodation of the Centaurs by the Lapiths offers a fair reflection of the wild nature of the centaurs. It tells that under the influence of wine during the wedding of Peirithous, the Centaurs lost their self-control and attacked the bride, and a bloody combat with the Lapiths ensued (Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, lines 12.210-535). The monumental sculptural composition on the west pediment of the temple at Olympia represents the nature of the Centaurs as savage and wild, as opposed to the moderate Lapiths. As a salient feature of the Classical Greek viewpoints, the western gable introduces the two opposite characters that reflect this dichotomous view: the Lapiths as the embodiment of *sophrosyne* and *arete*, and the Centaurs as the incarnation of *hubris* and *pathos* (Stewart, 1990, pp. 142-146; Robertson, 1989, p. 86-87). The Centaurs functioned as an apparatus that defined all that was negative to the Greek ideal (Cherry, 1995, pp. 139-140). The character of the Lapiths was visually depicted by means of peaceful expression and moderately athletic body. This appearance personified the Classical archetype of the *kalokagathia*, which is the good or noble intrinsic qualities (*agathos*), manifested by visual beauty (*kalos*) (Stewart, 1997, pp. 63-70, 356-357; Stewart, 1990, 9-12; Plato, *Protagoras*, lines 356-357; Plato, *Hippias Major*, 1982, 5.287-29). This archetypal image, as a Platonic idea, was meant to ensure the existence of order in a world conceptualized as rational and cyclic. The Centaurs, on the contrary, symbolized the *aischros*, which is the ugly, lacking in the noble qualities such as moderation, self-control and excellence (*sophrosune*, *enkrateia*, *arête*), and were thus represented with distorted wrinkled faces and savage expressions. The implications of this monument are political, as the Lapiths symbolized the *sophrones* Greeks while the centaurs represented the *hubristai* Persians.

Does, then, David Bowie's image as a centaur bear the significance of *hubris* or *sophrosyne*? The Centaur in Antiquity was in effect the embodiment of alterity and everything that was un-Hellenic. As a foreign god, unlike gods such as Athena, Apollo or Zeus, Dionysus too represented the excluded 'Other'. The principle of autochtonity defined citizenship only for those whose parents were Athenian natives, while foreigners, slaves, women and children were 'others' and not eligible for citizenship (Loraux, 1986, pp. 148-150; Herodotus, *The History*, lines I, a56). 'Otherness' is a main issue in the post-colonial discourse and a hybrid image can be conceived as a manifestation of otherness in its broader sense. Thus, the hybridity of Bowie's image confronted the viewer with the idea of 'Otherness' that is embodied in Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the contemporary era as that of minorities (Deleuze et Guattari, 1980, pp. 518-520). Mythology tells us that amongst the Centaurs there were two civilized individuals: the enlightened Pholus and Chiron.

Pholus was the wise Centaur and Herakles's friend, and Chiron was Achilles's tutor and considered a prodigy. Both died as a consequence of the savageness of their brother Centaurs (Apollodorus, *The Library*, lines I.2.4, II.83-87). Pholus and Chiron represented the harmony between nature and culture, offering a different approach to interpreting Krispel's image of Bowie. The fusion between nature and culture is manifested in the fusion between Apollo and Dionysus as evidenced in statues from the Hellenistic period that are explained as a reflection of *mania sophron* - "temperate madness" or "controlled inspiration": namely, the poetic inspiration is the expression of profound emotion requires a logical order. Creation is thus born from merging of passion and control (Stewart, 1982, pp. 214, 205-227). Bowie's hybridity in Krispel's work might thus symbolize the *mania sophron*: the Dionysian passionate nature and the Apollonian logical nature. The study of Antiquity has understood this harmony as the key to prolific creativity, for the rational Apollonian sense always required the Dionysian passion, and vice versa. Furthermore, the hybrids in Antiquity, as well as being a symbol of otherness, also embodied divinity and sublimity, as they possessed the ability to cross metaphysical boundaries and function as intermediates between the human and the divine (Durand, Frontisi-Ducroux, Lissarrague, 1989, p. 126). The activity of the Dionysian retinue that the hybrids were part of was aimed at leading the initiates into the Dionysian Mysteries.

Mysteria

The exhibition *Mysteria* by the artist Dor Confino comprised large dimension abstract works characterized by wide-open compositions, richly coloured and abounding in textures (Office Gallery, Tel Aviv, June 2014, curated by the author). The compositions resembled primordial creations, geological quarries rich in minerals or crystals arising from mysterious chthonic depths; or perhaps astronomical bodies viewed by satellite (figs. 12, 13, 14).



Figure 12: Dor Confino, *Hollow*, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 50 X 50 cm, photo: Tom Langford, courtesy of the artist



Figure 13: Dor Confino, *Beginner's luck*, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 110 x 170 cm, photo: Tom Langford, courtesy of the artist



Figure 14: Dor Confino, *Meta*, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 180 x 160 cm, photo: Tom Langford, courtesy of the artist

They appeared too as if having passed through a sieve and accumulated on the surface as a result of a cathartic experience, evoking once more Kristeva's discussion on the necessity to eliminate the refuse and the impurities in order to enable the continuity of life. This will become meaningful in the following. Confino's affinity to Classical mythology is revealed in two works, entitled *Ariadne's Thread* (fig. 15) and the *Birth of Athena* (fig. 16), characterized by riotous layers of colours and textures that bestow upon them a mysterious nature.

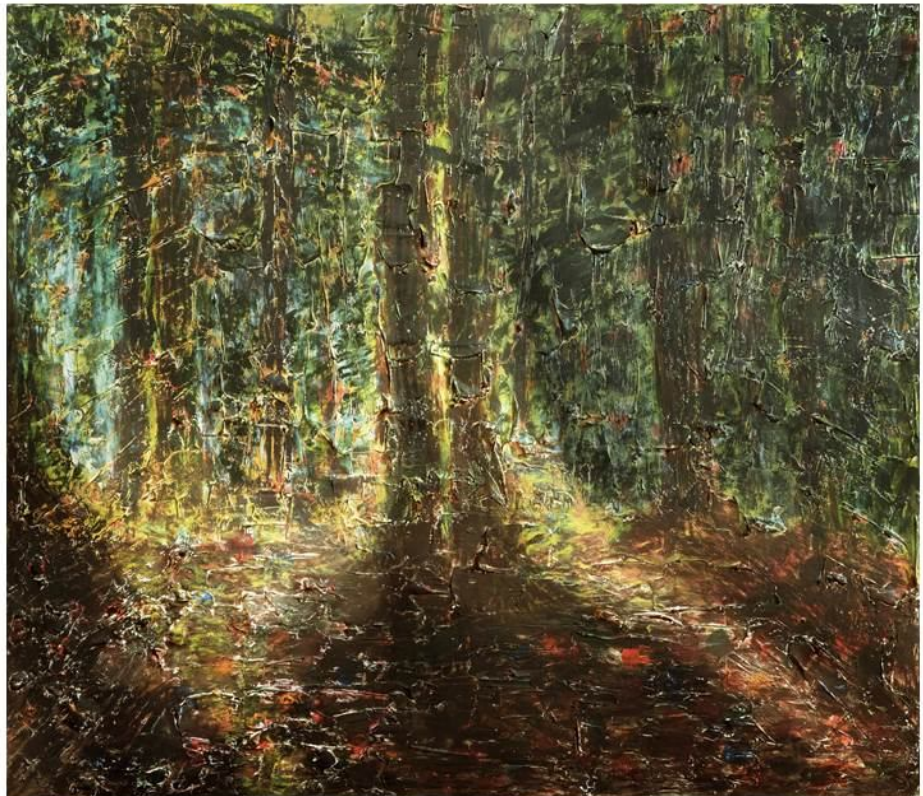


Figure 15: Dor Confino, *Ariadne's Thread*, 2014, mixed media on canvas, 160 X 180 cm, photo: Tom Langford, courtesy of the artist



Figure 16: Dor Confino, *The birth of Athena*, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 180 x 160 cm. photo: Tom Langford, courtesy of the artist

The tectonic abstract textures resemble a vortex composition in the work *The Birth of Athena*, alongside the subject's mythological source, eliciting thoughts on their underlying aesthetic and mental sources. Dor Confino, a professional architect, paints abstract compositions on huge canvases, using building materials such as gypsum mixed with pigments, acrylic and glues, without using brushes of any sort but only pure physical and intense exertion – by means of her bare hands. Her hands are her palette, resembling a stringed instrument, a bow, by which she controls the canvas's chords and works passionately, "like some animal" as she herself attests. As if running amok, she drags her fingers across the canvas to create savage textures and weaves of colours, as if they are saturated with precious gems beneath the strata. Confino's artistic process is indeed exhausting and gruelling, and her use of building materials reflects a process of creating life out of raw materials.

The two last works noted, inspired by mythology, are connected conceptually with motifs such as journey and birth. The journey in the painting *Ariadne's Thread* appears dark and mysterious, while the birth in *Athena's Birth* seems turbulent and stormy.

Both works evoke mythological metamorphoses and physical and mental journeys, such as the *Odyssey*, Psyche's journey and others. Indeed, the artist herself underwent the personal odyssey of a physical and mental process of receiving fertility treatments that lasted many years, in a tremendous effort to fulfil her yearning to become a mother. A work such as *In My Distress I Cried* (fig. 17) offers an outburst of immense energy, the outcome of a mysterious emotional journey that climax in a kind of *catharsis*.



Figure 17: Dor Confino, *In my distress I cried*, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 160 x 180 cm, photo: Tom Langford, courtesy of the artist

The association of Confino's artistic work with a Dionysian mysterious journey derives from two main reasons: the turbulent and cathartic Dionysian-like aesthetical and conceptual character of her works; and the personal journey to achieve fertility that she had undergone, and her own assertion that her artistic work and style arose from this experience. These two aspects can be associated with the mysterious cultic rituals (*Mysteria*) held for Dionysus in Antiquity since the 6th century BCE.

These sacred rituals comprised a series of acts of purification that the initiates underwent in order to achieve two things: an illusion of merging with the divine and a promise of eternal life after death; and fertility, as in Antiquity Dionysus was considered as a woman's god. The mystical unification with the divine is expressed by Plotinus as the most desired wish and the supreme goal of the initiates in Antiquity (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, lines 6.9.11; Jas Elsner, 1995, pp. 91-97). The origin of the soul is the divinity, "the One" (*Hen*), for whom the soul permanently yearns but is unable to reach except upon entering a temporary state of trance (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, lines 5. 8. 11). A human is able to experience the divine only at moments of ecstasy and through a mysterious contact, as stated by Plotinus: "[...] but retreating inwards, he becomes possessor of all; he puts sense away behind him in dread of the separated life and becomes one in the Divine; if he plants to see in separation, he sets himself outside" (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, lines 5. 8. 11). The worldly medium used to bring about such ecstasy is wine, and thus the Dionysian realm, according to Plotinus (Plotinus, *the Enneads* 5. 8.10). The Dionysian sacred rites aimed at promising salvation in the afterlife, since the 6th century BCE were known as the *mysteria*, and the participants were the *mystai*. Participation in the Mysteries was possible only for those who had undergone a purification rite and as a result had become initiates – *teletes*. The Mysteries were considered as initiation rites, by which the divine secret that promised sanctification and unification with the divine was revealed. Another aspect in this analysis is that of the function of Dionysus as a fertility god. According to Classical thought the female could only be controlled through irrigation of the womb by male semen to keep it moist and solid and through pregnancy that anchors it in place. Hence the *phallus* and the semen, as linked to Dionysus, attracted women to his cult. Indeed, among all the male deities Dionysus was the most closely associated with women's rites of passage. Emperor Augustus urged that women bear as many children as possible, and a woman who provided heirs for her husband was generally held in greater esteem than one who did not. The desire for children led to women performing rituals for the fertility god Dionysus (Zeitlin, 1982, p. 135; Hammer, 2000, pp. 39, 46; Kraemer, 1979, pp. 55-80).

Female Dionysian rites are depicted on wall paintings in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, dating to the 1st - century CE. Women with serious contemplative faces are shown highlighted against a background of sensuous red.

The associations with fertility and initiation rites are expressed by several images: *Paniska*, which is a female Pan, nursing a goat, while next to her appears a panicking woman, perhaps an initiate undergoing *katabasis*; the unveiling of the mystic content of the *liknon*, a basket used during the rites and containing the *phallus*, considered as the generative force of life. In another crowning scene, the initiate is shown stretched out across the knees of a *maenad*, while a demonic figure with outstretched wings lashes her with a whip. This lashing may symbolize the path of purification towards sanctification and a merging with the divinity, as well as the suffering in pursuit of fertility embodied in ritual flagellation during the Lupercalia, an ancient purification rite for the city of Rome (Clarke, 2003, pp. 47-56; Henderson, 1996, pp. 235-276; Fierz-David, 1988; Ling, 1991, 101-104; Maiuri, 1953, 50-63; on the Lupercalia see: Ovid, *Fasti* 2.381-452). Euripides' play *The Bacchae* offers a sense of the wildness of the women seeking to participate in cult of Dionysus, reflecting on the connection between female fertility and this god:

First they let their hair fall loose, down over their shoulders, and those whose straps had slipped fastened their skins of fawn with writhing snakes that licked their cheeks. Breasts swollen with milk, new mothers who had left their babies behind at home nestled gazelles and young wolves in their arms, suckling them (Euripides, *The Bacchae*, lines 692-702).

Back to Confin's work: Her turbulent composition the *Birth of Athena* mentioned earlier might now be understood as a reflection of her own *katabasis*. A connection with the liberation of the soul through the Dionysian rite seems to be embodied also in two other works: *Free Spirit* (fig. 18), which introduces a bright entity that seems to be flying out of dark substance and might be interpreted as an embodiment of the Plotinian goal of liberating the soul from materiality; and *Vernissage* (fig. 19), which is a dynamic composition bathed in a golden light that leads to a central white spot, as an embodiment of a revelation by means of a sacred initiation.

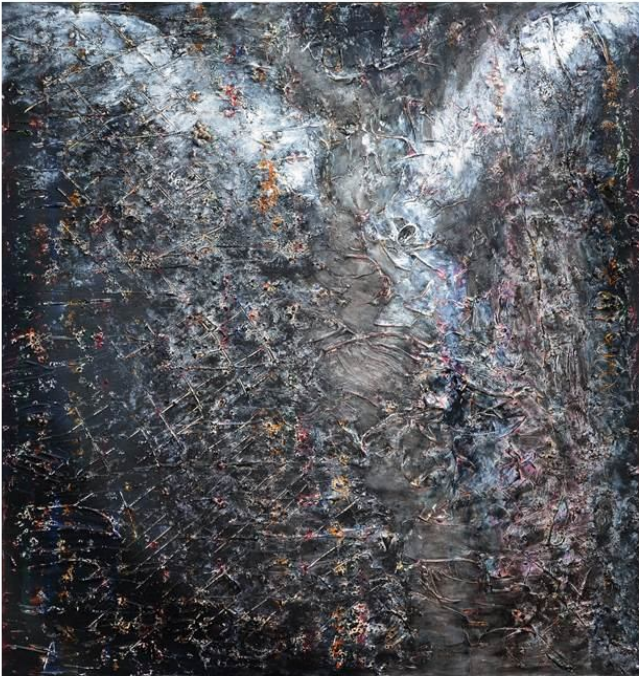


Figure 18: Dor Confino, Free Spirit, 2014, mixed media on canvas, 180 x 160 cm, photo: Tom Langford, courtesy of the artist



Figure 19: Dor Confino, Vernissage, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 160 x 180 cm, photo: Tom Langford, courtesy of the artist

The aspect of purification from impurity, or the sense of layers of material from which a precious essence will emerge, described above, has a strong presence in these works. They evoke Jameson's apprehension of the work of art as a metamorphosis of one mundane appearance into another, giving the example of a van Gogh painting of apple trees that are transformed on the canvas into coloured surfaces and emotional hues (Jameson, 1992, pp. 6-9).

Thus, the metamorphosed object is loaded with a new metaphysical significance, and hence offers a unique intersection between a Classical outlook and a postmodern concept, embodied in a work by a contemporary artist.

Climax

An apparently symbolic realization of a Dionysian ritual and ecstasy was embodied in the choreographic site-specific work *Climax*, composed by choreographer Yasmeen Godder and performed by seven dancers as part of the exhibition "Set in Motion" exhibited at the Petach-Tikva Museum of Art (May – September 2014, curated by Drorit Gur-Arie and Avi Feldman).⁵

The performance lasted three hours and was held in the same space displaying the exhibition that, following the curatorial concept:

Observes the renewed penetration of dance into the museum space today, and strives to direct its gaze at this present moment. It focuses on the choreography's pulse and the stratification of contemporary dance in relation to the museum's white cube, to alternative venues, and to collaborations with visual artists, which facilitate the establishment of language and thought, and the formulation of a new dance discourse. At the same time, this process also calls forth a reconsideration of the museum's status and role.⁶

The choreography of *Climax* was characterized by turbulent movements and hysterical facial expressions (figs. 20, 21, 22).

⁵ See trailer [Online]Available: <http://www.petachtikvamuseum.com/en/Exhibitions.aspx?eid=2887>

⁶ See in the museum's site. [Online]Available:

<http://www.petachtikvamuseum.com/en/Exhibitions.aspx?eid=2887>



Figure 20: Climax, choreographer: Yasmeen Godder, Photo: Tamar Lamm, courtesy of Petach-Tikva Museum of Art



Figure 21: Climax, choreographer: Yasmeen Godder, Photo: Tamar Lamm, courtesy of Petach-Tikva Museum of Art



Figure 22: Climax, choreographer: Yasmeen Godder, Photo: Itzik Giuli, courtesy of Petach-Tikva Museum of Art

In that sense, this work reflected that of the ritual, as dancing and movement in their very nature are inherent in the Dionysian experience, as part of the religious ritual, and are associated with extremes of emotion, often quite specifically madness and grief, excess and violence (Fitton, 1973, p. 245). However, as opposed to the Dionysian wild and uncoordinated ritual movements, *Climax* was precisely choreographed and thus functioned as a *pastiche*. The Dionysian ritual dance was intended to imbue a temporary sense of madness in order to liberate the soul and gain catharsis. Plato considers the Dionysian dancing as therapeutic and cathartic, and the temporal state of mental disorder, as in homeopathy, was destined to cure the soul (Plato, *Laws*, line 672; Lonsdale, 1993, 79-80). Dionysian ritual movements in the form of the *dithyramb* are savage in nature. Its synonym, *tyrbasia*, originating in the Latin word *turba* i.e. turbid, hints at its unbridled and wild character. The unruly movements accompanied by shouts were the human response to the apparent divine revelation supposed to happen during the ritual (Lonsdale, 1993, pp. 125-126). The phenomenon of *maenadism* is thus highly relevant for this discussion.

The *maenads* in the ritual were women of the social elite, who would enter into an ecstatic condition characterized by dishevelled hair and bare feet, acts that symbolized the breaking down of order and class equality. The ritual was accompanied by the sounds and rhythms of the tambourine and the *aulos* with its high tones by singing that became increasingly turbulent, to the extent of piercing cries that totally liberated the participants and conferred an ecstatic atmosphere. The Maenadic dance was of violent nature, comprising repeated hysterical shaking of the head and body and loss of the senses. The height of this activity was the moment of falling to the ground that embodied the total merging with the divinity and was followed by *euphoria* - an absolute silence and tranquillity (Bremmer, 1984, pp. 267-286). A similar situation featured in the performance *Climax*, when the participants lay down on the ground (figs. 23, 24).



Figure 23: *Climax*, choreographer: Yasmeen Godder, Photo: Tamar Lamm, courtesy of Petach-Tikva Museum of Art



Figure 24: Climax, choreographer: Yasmeen Godder, Photo: Tamar Lamm, courtesy of Petach-Tikva Museum of Art

Another close similarity to the Dionysian *maenadism* was reflected in an object installed in the performance space as part of the decoration: an image of a bleeding slaughtered animal whose internal organs spilled out onto the floor (fig. 25). This image was originally part of the decoration in another choreographic work by Godder – “Love Fire”.⁷

⁷ The image was designed by Inbal Lieblich and Zohar Gottesman. The horned headdress was made by the artist Alona Rodeh. [Online]Available: <http://www.yasmeengodder.com/index.php?p=works&id=21&m=ABOUT>



Figure 25: Animal (Design: Inbal Lieblich, Zohar Gottesman), from Love Fire, 2009, by Yasmeen Godder, and from 'Set in Motion' exhibition space, Petach-Tikva Museum of Art, Photo: Meidad Sochovolsky, courtesy of Petach-Tikva Museum of Art

The Classical interpretation introduced here invites a reference to the savage and cruel aspects of the Dionysian ritual. Godder's choreography was defined as cruel by Paolo Ruffini and violent by Raphael Zagury-Orly (Ruffini, 2014, p. 15; Zagury-Orly, 2014, pp. 16-18). Holy acts and beastly acts are dangerously similar, noted Barkan, since during the traditional holy act the celebrant seeks to evoke the god's presence and reach a union with it by means of a sacrifice (Barkan, 1986, p. 27). The extremism and duality pertaining between the sacred and the ferocious is reflected, on the one hand, by the ceremonial acts during the Dionysian ritual that embody the sanctity of the event, since the bull led to sacrifice is accompanied by music and a cheerful *Thiasos* choir that scatters fragrant flowers and perfume to dull the senses of the bull (Lonsdale, 1993, pp. 89-92). On the other hand, bloodshed follows this act, as reflected poetically in the *Bacchae* by Euripides, when the maenads tear young animals to pieces in their madness. The bloodshed reaches a peak in the *Bacchae* when the maenads slaughter Pentheus, Queen Agave's son, and she sticks his head on the end of her *thyrsus* (Euripides, *Bacchae*, lines 137-139, 734-742, 743-764, 1114-1143).

Another duality of *Climax* lay in its functioning as a liminal activity that blurred the boundary between performers and audience, located somewhere between the arts of dancing, performance, theatre and a parody cabaret, as indicated by the curator Drorit Gur Arie. *Climax* was presented in a museum and, therefore, the contemporary museum had appropriated choreography. This raises questions concerning the nature of such an institution: Is it simply an empty shell that can accommodate everything? (Drorit Gur Arie, 2014, 57). The accommodation of a dance work, in this case, accentuates the nature of contemporary art as transitory, a work through time, an unsolved dilemma and a process (Bordo, 2014, p. 808). A common characteristic of postmodernism and the Dionysian experience is that of liminality, and hence conducive to a comparative discussion, as follows. The first characteristic of breaking boundaries in this case was the inclusion of a dance-performance within an art exhibition in a museum hall. The exhibition "Set in Motion", as explained in the curatorial text:

[...] observes the renewed penetration of dance into the museum space today, and strives to direct its gaze at this present moment. It focuses on the choreography's pulse and the stratification of contemporary dance in relation to the museum's white cube, to alternative venues, and to collaborations with visual artists, which facilitate the establishment of language and thought, and the formulation of a new dance discourse.⁸

Likewise, the performance was given to an audience, with the dancers mingling amongst it. The contact with the dancers was so close that a touch of their body was very accessible, and their energy and sweat spread unmediated throughout. Noteworthy was an enchanted moment when one of the performers passed by while dancing and whispered "excuse me" in order to find her way. Between the dancers and the audience occurred "small clashes of consciousness [...] near-accidents controlled and guided by the dancers' skilled bodies", as the curator defined them; The audience sometimes found itself confused within a dancers' circle not knowing whether to participate or remain passive (Gur Arie, 2014, 56). This shattering of boundaries could be metaphorically associated with the subtle political Israeli situation that influences Godder's critical creativity ("Strawberry Cream and Gunpowder").⁹

⁸ See in the museum's site. [Online]Available:

<http://www.petachtikvamuseum.com/en/Exhibitions.aspx?eid=2887>

⁹ [Online]Available: <http://www.yasmeengodder.com/index.php?p=works&id=2&m=ABOUT>.

Liminality is a main feature of Dionysus, who is simultaneously man and woman, blurring boundaries and confusing order (Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel, 1992, p. 198). The blur between the mythological, the human and the divine is salient on Attic sixth-century vases featuring Dionysian revels together with his retinue – the satyrs and the maenads (Lonsdale, 1993, p. 106). The appearance of Silens on archaic Attic pottery is explained as the reflection of Athenian Satyr plays, or the outcome of the artistic imagination. The artistic image blurs between the Silens as mythological and theatrical images (Hedreen, 1992, pp. 156-157). The Dionysian ritual was unmediated, opens to all and did not separate between class, gender or race. The two main Dionysian festivals, the Great City Dionysia and the Anthesteria, were public gatherings that cancelled barriers through the inclusion of every stratum of society – masters, servants and children, as Ovid describes: “The people rush out of the city in throngs, men and women, old and young, nobles and commons, all mixed together, and hasten to celebrate the new rites” (Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, lines 3.529-30). Barkan’s commentary on Ovid’s description expresses a Bacchic experience that seems remarkably appropriate to *Climax*:

The senses become the means by which metamorphic flexibility can enter the human personality. Not only do the senses blend into each other, but so do single individuals, moral categories, the two sexes, social classes, and parts of the world. Bacchism unites all sorts and conditions of men and women (Barkan, 1986, p. 39).

Indeed, simultaneity, unity and freedom were salient characteristics of *Climax*: groups of dancers dancing simultaneously in two parts of the space; simultaneity of sounds emanating from other video works presented in the exhibition; the sounds uttered by the dancers; and the sounds of the freely-acting audience. Likewise, the male and female dancers were physically and spiritually intertwined in the unique experience they underwent, as can be seen in one of the highlights of the performance (figs. 26). Bisexuality is one of the characteristics of Dionysus, and the revellers at the festivals wore women’s clothing as a symbol of the god’s bisexuality and liminality (Zaidman and Pantel, 1992, p. 38).



Figure 26: Climax, choreographer: Yasmine Godder, Photo: Tamar Lamm, courtesy of Petach-Tikva Museum of Art

The initial question now becomes acute: What is the significance of the similarities and differences between the ancient Dionysian cult and a pseudo-ritual postmodern performance?

The answer might be found in an analogy between the fundamental ancient concepts and the contemporary ones that stand behind the two events. The Greek festival, *Heorte* ("a religious delightful experience") functioned as a social mechanism. The Dionysian ritual performed during the communal festivals was intended to cause a temporary state of shattering the social structure in order to recreate and restore it for the long term (Lonsdale, 1993, pp. 111-113). In comparison, the myth of the return of Hephaistos to Olympus might serve as an example of a return of order by means of pleasantness – music, wine, dancing, but not violence. In addition, the balance of power changes when Hephaistos, an otherwise inferior god, becomes significant, as he is the only redeemer (Lonsdale, 1993, pp. 85-88). Harmony is re-established on Olympus through the acceptance of the marginalized Hephaistos and the outsider Dionysus into the pantheon; and, as Guy Hedreen phrases it: "Stability is achieved by incorporating different forms of divinity into the pantheon instead of trying to exclude them" (Hedreen, 2004, p. 38); a statement so relevant to contemporary reality.

This tends to coincide with the curatorial concept that conceives dancing in the context of social action in the community and the public sphere, examining dance as a vehicle for constituting and defining a community and as a medium elucidating and promoting political and social goals (Gur Arie, 2014, p. 54).¹⁰ Hence it is as if the audience is participating in a *bacchic* ritual although, in fact, it remains an outside observer of the physical and spiritual experience that the dancers are undergoing. This pseudo-ritual performance offers a reflection of the lack of faith so prevalent in the postmodern era. The dance-performance *Climax* is a *pastiche*, to use Jameson's term, in the sense that the wild dance constituted a kind of secular ritual that embodied the postmodern disappointment with the substantial inability to sanctify and become one with the god. Indeed, the performance contained several climaxes, a series of segmented highlights and fractional moments of relief, as a postmodern schizophrenic experience. The energy disseminated by the *Climax* performers symbolizes an energy distributed in vain, in a godless universe lacking all faith. Perhaps, however, we should consider the words of the blind Theban seer, Tiresias, which may lead us in another direction: "His worshippers like madmen, are endowed with mantic powers. For when the god enters the body of a man he fills him with the breath of prophecy" (Euripides, *The Bacchae*, lines 298-301). Perhaps, indeed, a Dionysian inspiration might offer new implications regarding the bursting energy in a postmodern schizophrenic universe.

Conclusions

The above analysis of four exhibitions, achieved through applying the methodology of Classical Reception Studies, resulted from a consideration according to which the postmodern a-historicism state of mind, rather than methodological Classical reflections – especially on works by artists affiliated with Classical culture – might contribute to the understanding of contemporary art and its implications. As shown, the affinities to the Classics are not necessarily positive in these works; by and large they are indeed subversive. As parodists, the artists under discussion show an affinity to the Classics that they display through the use of a "dead language", to employ Jameson's term. However, understanding the meanings of the original images in Antiquity and their sources heightens the messages of the contemporary works.

¹⁰ See also the curatorial concept in the museum's site. [Online]Available: <http://www.petachtikvamuseum.com/en/Exhibitions.aspx?eid=2887>

In summary, the subversive and sceptical approach concerning Classical culture was embodied in the exhibition *Carrara Syndrome* by the artist Zohar Gotesman through his use of consumable materials and the intentional corruption of images. This use of various raw materials could perhaps be connected to metamorphosis and catharsis. However, by analogy to Petronius's *Satyricon* it would seem rather that Gotesman's images embodied decadence and decline. Gotesman's images criticized consumer society on several levels: the constant chasing after new stimuli; the abuse of the Classics through an a-historic approach; and on the level of contemporary art itself, which is temporary and consumed, as against the longevity of Classical art. One might refer here to Oscar Wilde's famous dictum: Knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Metamorphosis was the main motif in the exhibition *Tigers* by Joeseph Krispel, in which the Dionysian spirit was immanent. The aim of the Dionysian ritual - to create an illusion of merging with the divinity, was evoked by a drawing that seemed to offer a faint reflection of the glorious Dionysian procession displayed in Roman mosaics and in certain other works in which figures such as Dionysus and Heracles are stained by splotches. Krispel's work swayed between the yearnings for a stable existence associated with Antiquity, and the contemporary inconstant being. This artistic state of mind is called by the artist "the living dead". Painting, for Krispel, is something that is created, disappears and is recreated, and thus connected to the contemporary loss of faith. Another embodiment of metamorphosis characterized his hybrid image of David Bowie, in which one meaning of the hybrid in Antiquity was that of a symbol of alterity, a main focus of discourse in the post-colonial world. The hybrid responds to interpretation as the embodiment of *mania sophron*, i.e. controlled inspiration. Hence hybridity might be considered an advantage. The exhibition *Mysteria* by the artist Dor Confino was interpreted through association with the Dionysian mystery cult, aimed at creating an illusion of merging with the divinity as well as ensuring fertility. This association arises from the turbulent and cathartic Dionysian-like aesthetically and conceptually character of her works; as well as the personal journey she underwent in order to achieve fertility.

Bacchanalian elements were the main characteristic of the dance-performance *Climax* by the choreographer Yasmeen Godder. The analysis revealed liminality as a common character of both the Dionysian realm and the postmodern.

This liminality creates a cancellation of barriers that was very dominant in both the performance and the Dionysian ritual. Both aim at temporarily shattering the social order in order to establish a new harmony and social stability. The performance constituted a secular ritual in a world that has lost its faith, but still possesses a dim affinity to a Dionysian inspiration, like the Spirit of Hope in Pandora's box. Thus, mythology and history, as suggested in this study, are tightly interwoven in the present, and the reflections presented here may provide a thread for finding new paths of contexts and interpretations in the contemporary artistic labyrinth.

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