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RE-PROPOSING 'HEROIC' ABDUCTION IN ART: ON THE SIDE OF THE VICTIMS *THE ABDUCTION OF THE DAUGHTERS OF LEUCIPPUS* BY PETER PAUL RUBENS (1616) AND *CLASSIC TRAGEDY* BY MICHAEL MERCK (2004)

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the technologically focused orientation of modern society, where literature and art struggle to claim their own space and all thoughts are turned to the future, the influence, on the present, of writings, images and thoughts that belong to a remote past, i.e., to classical antiquity, is undeniable. Equally undeniable is the need to decode, interpret and reflect on the ways in which this leads the modern author or artist to adopt and re-adapt an ancient product and to appropriate it for the collective or individual new historical and cultural context in which this ancient product is revived. The increasing prominence that reception studies, have progressively achieved in the field of classics, demonstrates the emergency of this need (Hardwick 2003: 2; Martindale-Thomas 2006: 2-3; Hardwick-Stray 2008: 2). Promoting a 'two-way' relationship between the source text or culture and the new work and receiving culture (Hardwick 2003: 4-5), classical reception studies contribute to current debates in our society and offer fresh perspectives from which to examine classical antiquity. By adopting this approach, the present paper intends to analyze an artistic re-elaboration of one theme from classical antiquity that continues to resonate in modern society, not simply as a historical subject, but as part of contemporary experience, moreover one that transcends class and cultural barriers (Martindale 2007: 310; Hardwick-Stray 2008: 1-9). The theme is that of rape, and the re-elaboration under discussion is the collage *Classic Tragedy* (2004: Fig. 1) by the contemporary artist Michael Merck.[1]

Rape, or – to use a term that more accurately reflects the perspective of classical antiquity – abduction - is one of the themes that have attracted the attention of artists and poets during periods of classical revival (such as the Renaissance and in part the Baroque era for the purposes of this study), and one that has also attracted a lot of scholarly attention in the field of classics. Indeed, a closer analysis of classical mythology reveals the presence of a large number of stories of abduction,[2] which, not accidentally, are frequently present in ancient art, in particular in fifth century Athenian vase-paintings.[3] Unsurprisingly this theme has been revisited by artists from the Renaissance to modern times. To name but a few examples: *The Rape of the Sabines* by Bartolomeo di Giovanni (ca. 1488) and in another version by Nicholas Poussin (1630), *The Rape of Europa* by Francesco di Giorgio Martini (early 16th century) and by Titian (1559-1560), *The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus* (1616) and *The Abduction of Persephone* (1619-1620) by Peter Paul Rubens, and sculptures such as *The Rape of the Sabine Woman* by Giambologna (1528), and *The Rape of Proserpina* (1620-1621) and *Apollo and Daphne* by Lorenzo Bernini (1620-1622).

In transplanting those ancient stories into new contexts, what these later receptions all have in common is a paradoxically positive undertone in these scenes. By appropriating either the ancient view of rape/abduction by a god or a hero as a glorious event, or the ancients' pragmatic idea of the political and social necessity, so to speak, of specific actions (including rape), those artists have glorified, sanitized and aestheticized the violent and brutal act itself. To be taken by gods or heroes, even forcibly, was a great honor: this was, indeed, the 'standard' way of thinking among the

ancients,[4] one which Renaissance artists have perpetuated. Art historians have traditionally emphasized this reading by highlighting the grace and the beauty of the compositions themselves, the vivid representation and the harmony of the forms, such positive hallmarks that lead everyone, astonishingly, to gaze at them and forget or disregard what is actually represented: a morally humiliating situation, an unspeakably sorrowful event. As Diane Wolfthal's reaction in her *Images of Rape* (1999) demonstrates, Art History has moved on from this traditional position, which has indeed influenced the understanding of the construction of rape in Western culture.[5] Yet, this traditional position has its roots in the way in which rape was viewed in ancient times and, although it might be not as influential as it was in the past, it nonetheless reflects a perceptions of rape that persists and, as we will see, constitutes the starting point for Merck's adaptation and appropriation.

Using the 'working vocabulary for reception studies' (Hardwick 2003: 9-10), I intend to analyze Merck's work as an attempt to create ~~of~~ a modern reception of the theme of rape in terms of adaptation and appropriation of his model, Rubens' *The Abduction of the daughters of Leucippus* (1616: Fig. 2).[6] My analysis thus deals with not just the reception of a classical product; rather it deals with layers of receptions: Rubens' reception of the classical source-texts pertaining to that story of abduction, and Merck's reinterpretation both of Rubens' reception and of the ancient conception of rape/abduction. I argue that Merck's work might be labeled both an adaptation, in that it offers 'a version of the source developed for a different purpose', the purpose being to express his own experience of 'abduction/rape'; and an appropriation, in that it takes an ancient image or text and uses it to sanction subsequent ideas or practices. The subsequent idea being the new purpose for which the artist adapted Rubens' rendition of a classical story of abduction. Merck's reception seems to take a more sensitive approach to rape. Indeed, the artist chose to disassociate himself from both the classical original and Rubens' reception of it in an attempt to create a truly modern visual adaptation of this ancient story. In order to fully appreciate Merck's innovative approach one has to contextualize his collage in terms of the classical treatment of the theme of abduction and of the history of its reception in subsequent centuries, with special attention paid to Rubens' *The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus*.

'Heroic Abduction' or Rape? An Overview of the Theme and its Re-Elaboration in Renaissance and Baroque Art

If rape is as topical as ever, the word *rape* itself is 'an obscuring term', in that it 'fails to address the cultural status of the event' (Bal 1994: 37-80). In fact, while there is no problem in agreeing that ethical norms differ according to time and cultures, all of us experience, however, some difficulties in truly relating to and in writing about other societies, since the language we use is, inevitably, time- and place-bound. This is especially true when we refer to such a critical issue as rape in ancient times. Moreover the modern definition of rape has also been called into question, debated and is still characterized by imprecision.

The key, or at least one of the chief ways of defining rape, is that of consent. This is a shared feature of both the ancient and the modern way of dealing with this controversial subject.[7] The English term 'rape' comes from the Latin root *raptus*, which means 'the action of carrying off by force'.[8] The very origin of the word thus implies lack of consent.[9] However, in Latin, it did not *unmistakably* suggest a sexual connotation, i.e., the sexual violence that characterizes the modern sense and use of the word.[10] Not accidentally, in the classical texts 'rape' is often referred to with a term that is used synonymously, i.e., abduction, whose Latin root, the verb 'abducere', literally means 'to carry off, to appropriate by force'.

Raptus, *rapere* and *abducere* or its synonym *auferre* (to carry away, to appropriate, to steal) as well as – on the Greek side – *arpazein, arpage*[11] are the common words that ancient poets use in their tales of what I classify as 'heroic abduction'. Here I am adopting in modified form the label 'heroic rape' that was first used by the art historian Diane Wolfthal to describe the Greek and Roman myths in which the assailant is a god or a hero, following, in turn, the footsteps of the American feminist, journalist and activist Susan Brownmiller (Wolfthal 1999: 7 and n. 1). One of the best-known myths of abduction from ancient Greece is Hades' kidnapping of Persephone. It is treated in a variety of classical sources, from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* to Apollodoro's *Biblioteca* (1.5.1), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5. 391-567) and *Fasti* (4. 417-620). The event itself is referred to with the verb *arpazein* in Greek and *rapere* in Latin, all translated as 'to take away', 'to carry off', 'to abduct/snatch away'.[12] Similarly, compare one of the most famous instances of abduction in Roman history, the abduction/rape of the Sabines: Livy is our main source for this event and he refers to it by repeatedly using the verb *rapere* (*Ab Urbe Condita* I. 9-10), commonly translated as 'to carry off'.[13]

Still in terms of language, further evidence that *arpage* or *raptus* - although terms that imply force and thus lack of consent - did not explicitly refer to sexual violence is provided by the fact that, if sexual violence, too, is meant, another set of words is used, either in conjunction with these or on their own. These are *bia* and *biasmos* in Greek, and *vis* in Latin (all meaning 'force', 'violence'). The occurrence of these words in cases where it is clear that sexual violence was applied, however, is not consistent; and this testifies to a terminological confusion reflecting a clear tendency to deny and to override the true nature of the action. For instance, with regard to the Latin *vis*, Livy's use of this terminology when he refers to the cases of Rhea Silvia and Lucretia is illuminating (*Ab Urbe Condita* 1.4; 1.58-1.60): these are clear instances of sexual intercourse with a non-consensual partner.[14] The Sabine women, too, also did not consent, at least initially. And yet, the use of 'just' *rapere* is typical of the terminology that the historian uses to describe the event, despite the use of force.[15]

A careful examination of the ancient stories of 'abduction' reveals that the *arpage* or *raptus* was more than just 'a carrying off/ taking away'. Ultimately it implied sexual intercourse, which the women had to accept against their will. In Greek mythology, to name just a few examples, Io, Europa, and Leda were all 'raped/abducted' by Zeus and as a result fell pregnant and bore a child. In ancient Rome, in the case of the Sabine women, what the Romans wanted were children and 'only one act – at least in Roman times – could produce them'.[16] In other words, the motif of abduction in classical antiquity implies rather than explicitly asserts sexual violation. However, both the interpretations and the artistic reception of this theme, in ancient as well as in modern times, have tended to either neglect or to sanitize this darker aspect of the story. To be chosen by a god or a hero was seen as a privilege and a great honor. Zeus singled out a woman to be the mother of a divine child, or of a hero or heroine, for a larger purpose. The bearing of such a child served to move the story forward (Brownmiller 1975: 283) Zeus's 'rape' of Leda, for example, resulted in the birth of Helen. It thus served as the myth of 'super-heroic proportions responsible for the eventual fall of Troy' (Brownmiller 1975: 284). Similarly, Mars' rape of Rhea Silvia is the first step in a grand plan that culminates in the founding of Rome. In the case of the Sabines, their abduction is the means by which Rome survives and prospers.[17] The feelings of the chosen woman are not taken into account:

> Bride of mighty Jove, although you do not know, you are his own dame. Stop this sobbing; learn to accept with good will this great fortune: you shall give your name to half mankind (Horace, *Odes* 3. 27)

These are the words that the Roman poet Horace addresses to Europa raped by Jove. Rape was thus equated with marriage, and the rape victim would, in the end, be happy with her assailant.

In the early modern era, humanists and artists appropriated this classical concept of the conflation of rape and marriage. They emphasized, or even 'glorified', the male figure (whether it was a god or a hero) who was depicted as admirable, strong and virile. Rarely, if ever, do they sympathize with the victims, who are represented in both ancient and modern art as terrified and/or attempting to escape their captor. This representation rather seems to underline the women's powerlessness. The female figure is usually portrayed as a shaky and fleeting outline, with her dress torn. Her body is often depicted in a twisted posture with her torso directed away from the captor, which suggests lack of consent, and thus an undercurrent of violence. One such ancient example is a wall painting from Vergina (Macedonia, mid-fourth century B.C.).[18] In Renaissance art, among the best example we can refer to Titian's *The Rape of Europa* and Bernini's *The Rape of Proserpina* and *Apollo and Daphne*.

Moreover, when in the scene there are female companions who witness the event, the victim's arm(s) extend(s) toward those companions in an attempt to communicate, to seek help.[19] Yet, all of these components seem to be glossed over by the artists themselves (in particular by those who revived mythic stories of abduction in Renaissance art), and, at least until recent decades, by art historians. The artists tend to justify the 'incident' by aestheticizing the rape and sanitizing the sexual components of the theme, either because of the greatness of the act itself – in accordance with the ancient views about rape and marriage – or because such a viewpoint corresponds with the artists' contemporary attitudes and experience. For instance, the artist Nicolas Poussin, in his *Rape of the Sabines* highlights the 'heroic' founding of Rome. He adopts the point of view of the 'rapists'. Poussin justified the incident by appropriating the ancient concept of 'raptus' and idealizing the crime: women, children and the elderly are sacrificed in the pursuit of a higher goal. Art historians have contributed to this 'aestheticization/sanitization' process by labeling the painting as 'heroic' and by their judgment that it is the best expression of Poussin's belief that the main goal of art is the representation of noble human action, which reveals that the artist considered this event a 'noble human action'.[20]

In a similar vein, Gianbologna's statue of *The Rape of the Sabine Woman* (1583) has been aestheticized and sanitized in light of contemporary attitudes and views. The artist was one of the important court sculptors of the Medici. These aristocratic rulers were the usual type of 'purchaser' of artworks in this period. The statue depicts a woman struggling, wearing an anguished expression. Forcing a woman to submit sexually – as has been noted (Hemker 1985; Carroll 1992; Cohen 1996: 117; Wolfthal 1999: 23-4) – was viewed as a parallel to politically dominating one's subjects.[21] For the aristocratic rulers of the early modern period, 'heroic' rape imagery aroused feeling of omnipotence (Wolfthal 1999: 23). They tended to identify themselves with the Roman heroes and gods who held absolute power and subjugated, often violently, all 'others'. This type of images became symbols of power. *The Rape of the Sabine Woman* was, in fact, intended for public display. Francesco de' Medici, grand duke of Tuscany, wanted it to be installed in the main square of Florence (Piazza della Signoria), near his seat of political power (Palazzo Vecchio), to 'proclaim' the dominance/rule of the Medici dynasty (Carroll 1992: 142; Wolfthal 1999: 24). 'As a generic rape scene, its meaning is clear: that of a victory monument to Medicean success in subjugating the citizens and subject territories of Florence' (Carroll 1992: 142 and n. 23).[22] Art historians have contributed to the aestheticization, sanitization and glorification of the event by perpetuating the Medici interpretation of this ancient story of rape and its accompanying political propaganda. Gianbologna's statue thus became a work that:

> served to exemplify the much-admired patriotism and resolution of early Rome that permitted any act, even a ruthless or barbarous one, which would assure the future of the nation (Friedlaender 1966: 142).

RUBENS' THE ABDUCTION OF THE DAUGHTERS OF LEUCIPPUS

Rubens' *The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus* is one of the 'heroic' rape images that reflect the world view summarized above. This myth is not as famous as the others already mentioned. The main literary sources are Theocritus (*Idylls* 22 [The Dioscuri]. 137-213) and Ovid (*Fasti* 5. 697-720).[23] Both accounts focus on the fight that the Dioscuri engaged in with two men, Idas and Lynceus, to whom the maidens, the daughters of Leucippus, had been betrothed. Both poets seem to refer almost *en passant* to the event that led to the fight, namely the abduction:

> The two sons of Zeus, having snatched up (anarpazein) a pair of maidens, the daughters of Leucippus, were bearing them off. But there followed two brothers in hot pursuit, Aphareus' sons, Lynceus and mighty Idas, to whom they had been betrothed. (Theocritus *Idylls* 22. 137-9)

Theocritus (22. 137-9) devotes the rest of the poem (circa 74 lines) to a description of the fighting and its outcome. Similarly Ovid dedicates only two lines to the abduction, in order to focus on the fight that follows:

> The brothers, sons of Tyndareus… had carried off (auferre) and seized (rapere) Phoebe and Phoebe's sister. Idas and his brother prepare for war and ask the restitution of their brides… (Ovid, *Fasti* 5. 699-701).[24]

It is noteworthy that the poets do not make any further reference to the abduction, nor do they elaborate on the state of the women, the part they play, or their reaction. It is significant that there is, instead, an immediate shift to the fight. This is a fight to assert oneself and to demonstrate superior strength and authority over a 'possession'.[25] Ovid, however, does mention that love was the motive for one pair (Idas and Lynceus) to demand restitution, and the reason for the Dioscuri to refuse it, so that 'each pair', as the poet says, 'is spurred in on the fight by a common cause' (5. 703-4),[26] love. But, was it love?

In Rubens' painting as in many of the 'heroic' rapes created in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, there are figures of Cupids, well-known symbols of love and passion. In this painting they help control the reins of the Dioscuri's horses. They assist them in pursuing their 'object' of love: the women. But, the question remains what is love and was it the real focus of the artist? Taking into consideration the historical-political world view of the early modern era was it not rather a kind of celebration of violence, in particular sexual violence, and of the forcible subjugation of women by men as an allegory with political implications? (Carroll 1992: 140-2; Wheelock 1988: 108). My counter-reading of the painting focuses on the undercurrent of violence and lust in the demeanor of the two brothers and on the resistance evident in the response of the two sisters.[27] I wish to draw attention to their attempt to escape and to enlist help, coupled with their anguish, powerlessness and impotence against the overbearing force of the captors. The mass of the sculpted, idealized forms is carefully controlled. This is an orchestrated composition, the rich colors work to aestheticize the violence of the event by overriding any darker reflections on the coercive nature of the abduction.[28] This is part of the reason why, as in other artworks of 'heroic' rape, the predatory violence of the act is discounted. There was a tendency to glorify and idealize such rape scenes by appropriating another ancient, classical view of rape, namely that this act when committed by heroes or gods was an ecstatic, rapturous event. The spiritual union of a god and a mortal

represented an allegory of salvation, and came to symbolize the progress of the soul toward heaven.[29] The artists themselves, too, tended to sanitize these events through the political dimension that their work came to assume,[30] given that gods and heroes served as allegorical representations of royalty: 'in early sixteenth-century Europe, princes came to appreciate the particular luster rape scenes could give to their own claims to absolute sovereignty'.[31] These artists whether by glorification or sanitization have thus helped to disguise or 'mystify' the actuality of rape, namely the sexual violence (Carroll 1992).

The women are silenced in these works of art. Even when their role is considered, it is always from a male perspective, so that either it is seen as an honor to be chosen by a god or a hero and/or the women are thought of as ultimately willing. Both are means of sanitizing the painting or sculpture (Wheelock 1988: 108; Wolfthal 1999: 33). The willingness of the victims – in spite of their evident reluctance - is another idea that has its roots in classical antiquity. All these stories of abduction have a 'happy end', which implies consent. Ancient Greek and Roman societies were patriarchal and women had to yield to men's desires.[32] This *de facto* situation denies a voice to women. Even in these representations, however, it is clear that the women would have preferred not to 'be carried away'. We thus find here the roots of the well-known contention that 'no means yes', as epitomized in Ovid's poetry, in particular in his *Ars Amatoria* (Rachlin 1992: 168; Blamires 1992: 19-20; 112; Carroll 1992: 139-40). Taking as an example the episode of the daughters of Leucippus:

> Though she give them not, yet take the kisses she does not give. Perhaps she will struggle at first and cry, 'You villain!'. Yet she will wish to be beaten in the struggle… He who has taken kisses, if he takes not the rest beside, will deserve to lose even what was granted… You may use force (*vim*); women like you to use it… She whom a sudden assault has taken by storm is pleased… But she who, when she might have been compelled, departs untouched… will yet be sad. Phoebe suffered violence (*vim passa est*), violence was used against her sister: each ravisher (*raptor*) found favour with the one he ravished.
>
> (Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 1. 664-680)

As Diane Wolfthal remarks 'sounding like defense attorneys in a rape trial', de la Croix and Tansey note that in Rubens' *Daughter of Leucippus* 'the maidens do not energetically resist'.[33]

Reproposing 'Heroic' Abduction: On The Side Of The Victim M. Merck's *Classic Tragedy*

A contemporary rendition of Rubens' painting, Michael Merck's *Classic Tragedy* (2004), stands out in sharp contrast to such male oriented depictions of rape. Merck's reception of Ruben's painting is a collage that while resembling the pictorial composition of Rubens also breaks away from it and subverts it. Merck's innovations, as is his habit,[34] are not a mere stylistic expedient designed to distance his works from the works they are modeled on. It is not a question of exterior forms. The innovations, although inevitably pertaining to the visible *facies* of the work, suggest a reevaluation of the theme itself and its ensuing renditions.

In order to fully appreciate Merck's reworking of the classical themes, they have to be contextualized in terms of his general approach to art. Merck's rethinking of a theme and his subsequent re-proposition are the result of at least two interrelated processes. Firstly, the attempt to restore a fundamental meaning that, for whatever reason, has been overlooked by his predecessors, or one that has been obscured by the emphasis placed on other threads running through the theme; and secondly, the internalization of the theme, which then becomes a symbol or

an allegory of an individual's specific experience that can, however, also assume a universal dimension.

One such successful attempt to restore the meaning that lies behind a story made famous by an ancient author is Merck's re-proposition of the well-known classical theme of the episode of Oedipus and the Sphinx in his *Oedipus at the Sphinx* (2008).[35] Merck's *Classic Tragedy* is, instead, an example of the reworking of an ancient theme in terms of internalization. Such a process implies a connection on the personal level that also testifies, however, to the symbolic potency that an ancient theme and its modern reception can achieve in contemporary culture. This internalization process was for Merck the stimulus for the striking innovations of his model, Rubens.

To turn now to a detailed analysis of Merck's reception of Rubens' painting. Taking as a starting point the innovations that are designed to lead the viewer to discover the new meaning and message that the artist wants to express by his combination of new and original features, the present discussion develops my own reading of the work supported by a sequence of exchanges with the artist himself. Merck made himself available to discuss my analysis of his work and to clarify significant details. This dialogue with the artist was crucial for the better understanding of his intended meaning.

What, at first glance, most impresses and grabs the viewers' attention is the innovative portrayal of the two female figures. Although they resemble Ruben's original in terms of shape and position, significantly both of them lack an identity. One of them is a 'blank' figure, while the other's head is replaced by that of a horse. Another significant omission is that of the Cupid figure which in Rubens' painting appears on the left side, helping control the horse's reins. The female figures' lack of identity and the missing Cupid are interrelated and point towards the new meaning of Merck's re-elaboration.

To account for this new meaning, the viewer must re-evaluate the story of the Dioscuri and the daughters of Leucippus. Despite all the sanitizing, aestheticizing and glorifying interpretations discussed above, this is an episode of violence that brings pain and misery to the powerless victims. Their anguish for their lost innocence forcibly taken away from them is the real issue. Moreover this is not a generic type of violence, rather it is a very specific kind of violence: that targeting women. It is a rape/abduction that according to the literal meaning of those disputable words consists of a 'taking away' of what belongs to another. In line with the classical view of abduction, parents or prospective grooms were often designated as the ones suffering the 'robbery', but if we take the side of the female victims, rape 'robs' them of their dignity, confidence and self-image, in a word, their very identity. As Christine de Pizan states, this cannot but be 'douleur sur toutes autre'.[36] From the victims' perspective their 'greatest sorrow possible' was never really sympathetically considered in the older artistic representations of the classical episodes of abduction. By sympathizing with the deep anguish of the women and by recognizing the strong undercurrent of violence characterizing this 'classical' story of abduction, Merck has personalized it. He internalized it in order to identify himself and his own experience of 'robbery' and loss with that of the anguished, helplessly struggling female figures. What Merck experienced is, true to his own words, an 'abduction' of what should be most precious, an incomprehensible event, although common and almost 'standardized' by cultural and societal assumptions, a 'classic' just as abduction was in ancient times. The violence of the abduction event and the grief that it provokes in those who are taken away, are so severe that they sometimes deprive the victims of the semblance of life itself. They 'disfigure' them by 'taking away' their very self, to the point that they suffer a crisis of identity. It is the violent nature of these losses that drove Merck to depict the two female figures

as 'void', 'empty', deprived of identity, and yet struggling, if helplessly, when confronted with something inexplicable, something that leaves you speechless, disoriented, lost. My interpretation of Merck's collage grew out of the following exchanges with the artist:[37]

RL: From the few things you told me, it seems to me (and this testifies to your original way of re-elaborating classical themes) that you personalized a story of violence maybe (and now again you have to either confirm or refute this) to express both the violence and depth of the pain for a loss (comparable to the violence the women in the painting suffered and to their deep suffering for what they lost) and the 'preciousness' of what you lost, comparable to what is most, or among the most, precious things a woman can lose unwillingly and harmlessly - i.e., her own self-respect, dignity and self-confidence, in a way her own very/self-identity - to the point of drawing as missing/blank one of the women, and to substitute the face/head of the other woman, as if she (or both) cannot even see herself anymore as a person (so violent and painful is the loss!). Is that so?

Merck: Yes.

RL: Can the 'missing/blank/empty woman' and the one 'without her own face' identify your own deep sorrow and, maybe a temporary crisis of identity, since something important to you, a part of you, has been taken away, you yourself did not know who you were, etc. etc.?

Merck: Without a doubt… I definitely identify with the faceless (horse headed) figure… the white void is symbolic of something that was taken away from me… something that was taken away from the person who is now not there …. I would identify myself with something that had been taken away… at the same time I identify with the incongruity between idyllic and actual reality and realize that perhaps I was missing something to begin with that did not prepare me properly for this loss.

RL: Therefore, can we say that the missing woman or both women ambiguously symbolize both your sorrow (with the implications I have tried to describe above) and the objective loss (the concept of loss: so something or somebody is now not anymore, is missing)?

Merck: Yes

With Merck's consent, I could thus conclude that it is through his identification with the women that this artist, as a result, has cared to put into focus the side that has always been disregarded, that of the victims, their anguish and grief for what inexplicably they were experiencing.

Significantly, the removing of the figure of Cupid from Merck's work, has to do with the 'inexplicable'. In the traditional renditions of the classical stories of abduction love is not at issue. Following in the footsteps of ancient values, nobody raises the question of love; rather it is about the principle of blind, uncontrollable desire and the wish to assert one's own power.[38] By personalizing the story, while at the same time adding an universalizing dimension, Merck, on our behalf has drawn the power of love into question: how can love be the cause of such a violent event? How can it be the excuse for loss, and even the destruction, of something or somebody so precious and unique?

In order to understand Merck's point it becomes necessary to analyze the other basic components of the collage, the preserved figures of the Rubens' painting and their re-interpretation by the artist as a means of creating new meaning. According to Merck the Dioscuri, the abductors with their lustful gaze, 'signified conventional American ideals of success and work, societal and familial programming'. They symbolize the lure and seductive power of success and material possessions, which can 'take away'/ 'abduct' our most precious values, to provoke an irremediable loss and to destroy our very person. Merck's answer to my question about the missing Cupid figure on the left side was that 'The power of love was the central issue at hand'. 'How could something so powerful and unique be pushed aside in service of wanting things that everyone can attain?' 'Inexplicably' the power of love is involved in the ancient stories of abduction and from the point of view of the victims it is as 'incomprehensible' as the action itself. Equally 'inexplicably' and 'incomprehensibly', according to Merck, love can be 'pushed aside' in the face of material achievements. Re-examining the power of love from a modern perspective Merck expresses the 'inexplicable', if not paradoxical, involvement of love in an episode of violence, grief, anguish and loss. He achieves this by eliminating its representation. The artist projected onto the blank figure both a person 'taken away' from him and at the same time that which has been 'taken' from the 'abducted' person.

In the semi-blank figure with the anonymous red horse-head, Merck projected his sense that he is the one who has been 'taken away', i.e., the one who has lost something precious inside. Additionally, he represents himself as a helpless witness, helpless because he lacked the tools and strength to resist.[39] He thus placed himself in the position of the women in the ancient stories of abduction. They, too, lacked the tools and strength to resist. They were helpless witnesses that could only endure the action perpetrated at their expense. The artist deliberately chose to side with the victims. Merck selected Rubens' painting of *The Abduction of the daughters of Leucippus* as his model for the scene of abduction because for him it symbolizes the 'greatest sorrow possible'. As he said: 'the picture moved me and I internalized it'.[40] It is precisely the representation of the women which is the most innovative feature of his reception: the representation of the women's experience that had been overridden by preceding artists. It moved Merck to such a degree that he used it to symbolize his own experience, that of a male. Projecting himself onto the victims' side and internalizing their anguish both form part of Merck's strikingly innovative strategy for the reception and appropriation of the ancient conception of rape and its reception in Rubens' work. He was thus able to adapt them in such a way that they fit in a modern context and with his own life experiences. This approach to the adaptation and appropriation of the theme of rape led the artist to propose a new and more sensitive approach to it: a female approach, what rape might mean for a woman, in a male artist's rendition.

Merck also wanted his work to have a universal dimension, 'a universal appeal' as he put it. This is the other reason why he left one figure completely blank and replaced the head of the other with that of an anonymous red horse's head, with which he identified:

> I didn't want to put my face in the collage; then it makes the picture about me' …although it is about me for me, it is also from me for everyone else… I am not the only person to experience these emotions… I think they are very typical of the human condition and therefore I would not want to exclude anyone from inferring their existence onto the forms present and the opportunity to contemplate their import.[41]

The title he chose, *Classic Tragedy*, reflects this universal, timeless dimension, a tragically common one that has become the norm, the standard. When I asked him whether the idea that in ancient

times abduction was a 'standard' event, 'a classic', had any impact on his choice of that title, Merck's answer was:

> Many have more success than love or love of success than actual connection with another human being. I find it to be tragic. But it is the standard.[42]

Whatever violation/abduction event has marked Merck's own life, the artist recaptures the violation from the victims' point of view: he finds it tragic in contrast to the ancient point of view. Merck leaves his work open-ended,[43] so that everyone can project himself/herself onto his collage, particularly onto those significantly blank figures. And, to my eyes what Merck has so vividly recaptured in these sadly empty figures the silent, everlasting, unheard crying of the victims' misery.

My interpretation of Merck's collage is based on his reception of Rubens' painting and on the classical sources that are the original source for both. This case study demonstrates how classical reception studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of both the past in light of its survival in the present and of the present in light of its roots in the past. Rubens' reception demonstrates the prevalence down the centuries of the male point of view of the theme of rape. This has proven so entrenched that unsurprisingly people can still relate to it even today. Merck's adaptation and appropriation works as a reaction against this stance finally allowing room for the articulation of the 'other' side of the story: that of women. Using Rubens as an intermediary we can demonstrate how classical antiquity can contribute to contemporary debates, and how classics can be enlivened and made relevant in the modern world.

Fig. 1: Michael Merck *Classic Tragedy* (Collage: 2004)

Fig. 2 - P. P. Rubens: The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus (1616)

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Translations

Unless differently indicated in a note, the translations I have adopted are:

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[1] Michael Merck currently lives and works in New York (NY). Information about his oeuvre can be found at www.michaelmerck.com. The work under discussion was completed in 2004. It can be viewed on Merck's website, under the letter 'c', of the name 'Merck', n. 9. My analysis and

discussion of Merck's work is based on my own reading and on a series of exchanges with the artist conducted via correspondence.

[2] In this respect, the title of a recent book by Madeleine Kahn: *Why Are We Reading Ovid's Handbook on Rape?* (2005) is very revealing. This is the very question students asked while studying Ovid's *Metamorphoses* at Mill's Women's College. It draws attention to an issue that generally tends to be ignored in Classical Mythology or Classical Literature classes. Ovid's text is full of female characters that are either being literally raped or metaphorically stripped of their personhood in their attempt to escape rape and this is a common theme in the entire *corpus* of ancient Greek and Roman myths. For Ovid's treatment of the theme see Curran (1984: 263-86); Richlin (1992: 158-79).

[3] Stewart (1995: 74; 87-8). For an overview of the portrayal of abduction in fifth- and fourth- century B.C. Greek art see Cohen (1996: 117-36).

[4] For instance, Livy wrote about the Vestal Rhea Silvia: 'vi compressa Vestalis, cum geminum partum edidisset, seu ita rata, seu quia *deus auctor culpae honestior erat*, Martem incertae stirpis patrem nuncupat' (Taken by force, after having delivered twins, the Vestal names Mars as the father of the uncertain offspring, whether she believed so, or due to the fact that a god was regarded as a rather honorable agent of [her] fault". 1. 4. 2; the italics and translation are mine). It is interesting to consider the connotation of a god as 'auctor culpae honestior', which implies a positive view, or at least an 'a priori' lack of culpability on the male side, given that a man would be a 'honestus auctor'. Ogilvie noted (1965: 48): 'The Vestal's rape was common and sordid: it is ennobled when a god is credited with having been responsible'. Behind the Vestal's declaration that the god was the father of the twins, given that he would be an *auctor culpae honestior*, lies the fear of the stigma of rape. Another relevant case is that of the Roman girl Vergenia, who was killed by her own father, as the only means of preserving her purity and reputation. According to Livy:

> Verginius, seeing no prospect of help anywhere, turned to the tribunal. 'Excuse me, Appius, I pray you, if I spoke disrespectfully to you, forgive a father's grief. Let me question the nurse here, in the maiden's presence, as to what the real facts of the case are, that if I have been falsely called her father, I may leave her with the greater resignation'. 'With the permission being granted, he took the girl and her nurse aside to the booths near the temple of Venus Cloacina… and there, snatching a butcher's knife, he plunged it into her breast, saying, 'This is the only way in which I can, I vindicate, my child, your freedom.'… The matrons, who followed with angry cries, asked, '*Was this the condition on which they were to rear children, was this the reward of modesty and purity?* (Livy 3.48: the translation is mine)

The modern prejudice surrounding cases of rape is deeply rooted in this ancient prejudice that a woman's innocence is always suspect. See also Lauriola (2010: 117).

[5] Issues concerning rape and its representations in the medieval period are a recent object of interest, which was inaugurated by Kathryn Gravdal's 1991 study: *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law.*

[6] See Georgievska-Shine (2009: 69-110) for an aesthetic analysis of this painting, with a special focus on the way in which the artist re-elaborated the story by playing, so to speak, with his sources – or as Georgievska-Shine puts it by 'plundering' his sources.

[7] The problem of consent is broadly discussed in Laiou 1993.

[8] *Raptus*, in turn, comes from *rapere*, 'to seize and carry off; to take away by force; to carry off (and violate); to possess oneself of by constraint' (see *Oxford Latin Dictionary,* s.v. *rapio*). See also Lecrivain (1877-1919, 4/ 2: 810-1); Adams (1982: 175); Wolfthal (1999: 9).

[9] Interestingly, whose consent is being withheld here is also questionable. Indeed, in Berger (1953: 667) s.v. *raptus*, we find the following definition: 'The abduction of a woman against the will of her parents'. See also Packman (1993: 53 n. 16): '… the action of *rapere* is only applied to women where they are carried off against the will, not necessarily of themselves, but of the persons they properly belong to'. This illustrates ancient attitudes to.

[10] As Wolfthal noted (1999: 9 and n. 12): 'If violence was a necessary component of this crime, sexual intercourse was not', although the latter is also implied. In other words, sexual violation is implied rather than stated: see Cohen (1996: 119); also, below, nn. 13, 15-17. The Romans had a word that today is used interchangeably with the term rape: *stuprum*. Yet it, too, proved to be an ambiguous word, because it included for example *adulterium*, too. *Stuprum* has been given the generic meaning of 'sexual disgrace', and it was used to refer to any sort of sexual indecency or deviancy, among which adultery was numbered. See Adams (1982: 200-1); Gardner (1986: 121-5). On the other hand, *adulterium* was often used interchangeably with rape. Under Roman law adultery and rape were essentially viewed as the same and thus punished in the same way: a married woman who was raped was seen as having committed adultery. It seems that the position of being married was what made the rape be adultery. Starting with the *Lex Julia de adulteriis* adultery itself became a criminal offence. See Gardner (1986: 127).

[11] It is interesting that both classical languages had no specific word that exclusively refers to the act we call 'rape'. *Raptus* and *arpage* tend to emphasize more the moment of seizure than the event to which it constituted a prelude: see Cohen (1996: 117; 119). Indeed, both in archaic and classical Latin, when *raptus* and *rapere* appear with a personal object, they refer to the generic moving or removing of a person by force. When women are the personal object of these terms, they refer specifically to virtual or real kidnapping/abduction: see Packman (1993: 42-43; 53 n. 16). Similarly the Greek term *arpazein*, literally meaning 'to seize', when used with a female or child as direct object, refers not to sexual assault, but to abduction: see *LSJ*, s.v. *arpage* (the act of taking something by force, violent robbery); Cole (1984: 98 and n. 9).

[12] See, e.g., *HH* 2 (*To Demeter*). 3; 19-20; 80-81 (where *arpazein* is respectively translated 'to capture away', 'to catch away', 'to seize'); Apd., *Bibl.*5.1.1 (where the verb occurs twice and is translated as 'to carry off') ; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5. 395; 520 (where Persephone is described as 'rapta': 'ravished'); *Fasti* 4. 519; 525; 607; 609 (where the goddess is referred to as 'rapta': 'ravished/ravished maiden'); 445; 448 (where the action is described through the verb 'auferre': 'to carry off; to carry away'). With reference to this terminology, one may also remember the title of Claudianus's epic poem *De raptu Proserpinae*.

[13] The Sabines are referred to by the verb *rapere*, which is commonly translated as the perfect participle 'carried off, stolen' (see, e.g., 1. 9. 11-2, 14; 1.10.1). Interestingly, with regard to the Sabine woman reserved for Thalassius, the possible action of 'taking, touching' her, which Thalassius's gang wants to prevent, is referred to by the verb *violare* (see also below, n. 14).

[14] Livy refers to what happens to Rhea Silvia as 'vi compressa' (1. 4, 2; see above, n. 6). *Comprimere* (literally meaning: 'to copulate, 'to have intercourse with': *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *comprimere*) is used in the context of what we would call 'rape' (the same can also be said for *stuprare* and *vitiare*: see Packman [1993: 52 n. 5]). In the case of Lucretia *violare* is used to describe the effect of Sextus Tarquinius's action on her body. From the point of view of the victim Lucretia describes the incident to her husband as *ceterum corpus est tantum violatum* (1. 58. 7). As for the action itself, it is referred to using the term *vis* and the verb *auferre* (1. 58. 8-9). The word *vis* occurs in the description of another act of violence against women in early Roman history, namely in the episode of Vergenia (3. 44-49: see, also, above, n. 6). Livy mentions the case of Lucretia as a kind of exemplar antecedent to this later case (3. 44. 1). The story of Vergenia is regarded as an 'example duplicated from the Lucretia episode': see Ogilvie (1965: 476-9). About Vergenia, see also below, n. xvii. As to Greek, strikingly, in modern Greek the verb *biazein* (to overpower by force, to

force) is often used in the context of violence perpetrated against women, and serves as a specialized word to signify rape. In ancient Greek, *biazein* is used, for instance, in Apd. *Epitome* 5.22, with reference to Cassandra. For other references and a concise discussion of *biazein*, see Cole (1984: 98); Sowa (1984: 124); Cohen (1996: 119 and n. 8). Another relevant Greek verb, that is sometimes used in the context of sexual violence, is *phtherein* (it occurs, for instance, in Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 3.14.8 in the story of Tereus and Philomela; in Ovid's account, the action is expressed by *vi superare: Metamorphoses* 4. 525). In *LSJ* (s.v. *phtheiro*), however, alongside its generic meaning of 'to destroy, ruin, corrupt', when it refers to a woman as the direct object, the only recorded meaning is 'to seduce'.

[15] As noted above (n. 13), Livy uses the verb *violare* only with reference to the woman reserved for Thalassius.

[16] Wolfthal (1999: 4). On the other hand, the basic purpose of marriage in ancient times was to conceive and beget offspring; the bond of marriage was thus mostly regarded in utilitarian terms. In the typical formula of the Athenian marriage ceremony the wife was given to the husband 'for plowing legitimate children': see, e.g. Renshaw (2008: 153).

[17] Arietti (1997). Similarly, the rape of Lucretia is regarded as a necessary step toward the ultimately positive outcome of ending the monarchy and creating the Republic (see Matthes 2000: 23-50); likewise the attempted rape of Vergenia precipitates the end of the corrupt rule of the Decemviri. By comparing the vicissitudes of the two women, Livy draws attention to the Vergenia incident as one 'which led to consequences no less tragic than the outrage and death of Lucretia, which had brought about the expulsion of the royal family. Not only was the end of the decemvirs the same as that of the kings, but the cause of their losing their power was the same in each case' (3. 44.1).

[18] See Wolfthal (1999: 7-35) and the similar conclusions of Cohen (1996: 117-36). They both refer to the reluctance and the screaming of a terrified Persephone in the major poetic accounts of her 'abduction' (see, e.g., *Homeric Hymn* 2, 19-21, 81; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5. 396-7; *Fasti* 4. 447). In ancient art, another significant example of the way in which the victims were usually portrayed is found in the representation of the Daughters of Leucippus on a sarcophagus that is dated to before the second century B.C. (now preserved in the Uffizi Gallery - Florence, Italy): Bober-Rubenstein (1986: 161-2); Wolfthal (1999: 15-7).

[19] For example, Persephone as portrayed in a wall painting from Vergina (Cohen 1996: 119-21), and the daughters of Leucippus depicted on the sarcophagus.

[20] See Costello (1947: 203-4); Arikha (1983: 5, 52). As Wolfthal observes (1999: 8-9), in Italy, from the fourteenth to seventeenth century, the episode of the Sabines was regarded as a patriotic act. The Sabines were revered as the mothers of the first Romans, and their 'rape' was considered essential for the foundation of the Roman family and the future of the nation. In light of this belief, Poussin, as well as the other artists that depicted this episode, make it clear that the women are seized against their will, but at the same time they justify the incident by suggesting that the women are paying the price for the 'heroic' foundation of Rome.

[21] Joshel (1992) observes that in the Lucretia episode, and generally in Livy's stories from early Rome, the female body becomes a metaphor for the private territory of the Roman male. Sextus Tarquinius conquered the chastity of Lucretia and thus invaded the home of her husband Collatinus; by besieging and conquering his home, Sextus has reduced Collatinus, and by implication all Roman males, to the status of a conquered people.

[22] For a similar, 'political' interpretation of the rape itself, see above, n. 21.

[23] I quoted above the main sources of this not-so-commonly-known myth (see also below, n. 24). Other important sources are: Hyginus, *Fabulae* 80; references to the episode are made in Pindar,

Nemea 10. 30-32; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.10.2 (where the standard verb *arpazein* occurs); and Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 1. 664-80.

[24] While Theocritus's reference forms part of the narrative of the *Idyll* itself, which is devoted to the Dioscuri, that of Ovid occurs in the detailed description of the transformation of the twins into a constellation. The focus is on the fight as the cause of the death of Castor, which in turn prompted Pollux to ask Zeus to grant his brother immortality. In consequence, they were both transformed into stars (the Gemini constellation). Ovid concludes the story by reporting Pollux's prayer to Zeus: 'Father, hear my words: that heaven you grant me alone, share between us: half will be more, then, than the whole of your gift. He spoke, and redeemed his brother from death, by their changing places alternately: both stars aid the storm-tossed vessel' (*Fasti* 5. 718-20). The way in which Zeus granted Pollux's wish is actually re-told with variations by Hyginus, Pindar, and Apollodorus. For a discussion of the different accounts of the promotion of the two brothers to a constellation, see Frazer (1929: 116-7).

[25] The concept that women are the property of men is a hallmark of gender relations in ancient Greek and Roman culture, and it defined the shape of ancient wedding ceremonies. Usually the wedding was a negotiation between the heads, *kyrioi*, of the two families; it was a pragmatic social and financial contract, called an *engue*. The bride had no choice; she was pledged to a man of her *kyrios*' choosing. It was a forced marriage, a kind of abduction from the female point of view. It is not accidental that marriage was at times equated with grief (see Sophocles, *Fr.* 583Radt; on the *engue* see Ferrari 2003: 31). In the Roman world a similar process took place. One piece of evidence concerns the events that ultimately led to the abduction of the Sabines. Livy (1.9.2) recounts that Romulus put his marriage requests (= *conubium*) not to the women themselves, but to neighboring tribesmen. With reference to this, Carroll notes that 'to reinforce the principle that a woman was the property of one man or another, early Roman marriage ceremonies – in which the bride, as the possession of the father, was 'handed over' to the husband – often incorporated ritual practices recalling the original Sabine rape' (1992: 144 and n. 41).

[26] Hyginus, too (*Fabulae* 80), mentions love, namely as the cause of the action of the Dioscuri (*amore incensi eas rapuerunt* = 'burnt by love-passion, they took them'). And 'amor' (love) – as opposed to 'iniura' (offense) - is mentioned by Ovid in his story of the abduction of Proserpina by Pluto: Jupiter is the one who evokes love in answer to Ceres' complaint that he has allowed their daughter to marry a 'robber' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.520-6). From the perspective of a narratological analysis of the *Homeric Hymns*, as conducted by Sowa (1984), this kind of rape/abduction can be assimilated into the traditional theme of 'Stealing the Bride', which in turn belongs to a more general type: 'the Contest for the Bride' (129-30).

[27] According to Carroll (1992: 139) Rubens' work is characterized by some striking ambiguities: 'an equivocation between violence and solicitude in the demeanor of the brothers, and an equivocation between resistance and gratification in the response of the sisters'. On this see also Georgievska (2009: 71-2).

[28] As Carroll observes, 'The spirited ebullience and sensual appeal of the group work to override our darker reflections about the coercive nature of the abduction' (see also below, n. 29).

[29] So, for instance, with reference to Rubens' paintings, Carroll (1992: 139) comments: '… many viewers have wanted to discount the predatory violence of the brothers' act and to interpret the painting in a benign spirit, perhaps as a Neoplatonic allegory of the progress of the soul toward heaven, or as an allegory of marriage'. See also Georgievska (2009: 70). Alpers (1967) has explained this as an allegory of marriage. See also Wolfthal (1999: 31).

[30] Warnke (1980: 62) and Wheelock (1988: 108) tend to consider Rubens' work as a political allegory that refers to the contemporary domination of Spain over her provinces in the Netherlands. For a different complex of political allusions, see Carroll (1992) and (below, n. 31).

[31] Carroll (1992: 140). This scholar additionally observes that in the early sixteenth century the experience of politics and war was such that both theoreticians and rulers gave rise to a political view that not simply 'recognized the necessity of violence but indeed valorized it'. Carroll (1992: 141); see also Hale (1983: 359-87). Carroll also points out how evocations of dominance and power took on a distinctly sexual connotation based on the image of women as liking violent men who would have the audacity to master and command them. This scholar mentions, as evidence, a passage from chapter 25 of Machiavelli's *The Prince*: Carroll (1992: 141).

[32] There are a number of relevant examples that could be referred to, but to illustrate the point it is worth quoting Aristotle when he distinguishes male and female virtues: 'that of a man is command, that of a woman is obedience and subordination': *Politics* 1. 1260a20-32. He is here elaborating on Sophocles' comment that a woman's decency is demonstrated by silence: *Ajax* 293. See also Thuc. 2. 45 where in his funeral speech Pericles praises women's silence and submission.

[33] Wolfthal (1999: 33 and n. 154). De La Croix-Tansey's remark reveals that since ancient time a woman's virtue had to be tested. It is the victims who have to demonstrate their innocence, while men's conduct is rarely questioned. How far back this attitude dates is testified to, among several sources, by an episode that took place in the late Roman Empire: the emperor Constantine wanted to penalize even a girl raped against her will on the grounds that she could have saved herself by screaming for help: see Gardner (1986: 91).

[34] My work on another of Merck's works, *Oedipus at the Sphinx* entitled 'Revivals of an Ancient Myth in Modern Art: Oedipus and the episode of the Sphinx. From Jean Auguste-Domenique Ingres to Michael Merck' will appear in *Trends in Classics* 3.1 (2011).

[35] In the painting *Oedipus at the Sphinx* Merck makes the tragic irony characterizing Oedipus' story-life the central issue, thus returning to Sophocles' play, that had been overridden in previous paintings. Merck depicts this irony by converting the popular saying 'shoot yourself in the foot' into an image, which encapsulates the meaning of Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx, provided that it *foreshadows* his own demise, see Lauriola (2011).

[36] Christine de Pizan, *Livre de la Cite des Dames* (1405). The translation is by Richards (1982: 161). On Christine's representation of rape, see Wolfthal (1999: 127-50).

[37] This interview was conducted for the most part in December 2009. Some further exchanges took place in January-February 2010. I report the conversation *verbatim*, but I omit a few personal statements, out of respect for the artist's privacy.

[38] On this idea see Wolfthal (1999: 23).

[39] On this feeling of helplessness, see below, n. 41.

[40] This was Merck's answer to my question about why, out of so many depictions of abduction, he chose Rubens' painting. The artist added: 'I like the focused drama and composition of this picture'.

[41] The choice of a horse's head, to replace his own, is not accidental. It occurs also in the painting of *Oedipus at the Sphinx*. Merck typically re-uses themes and motifs that he employed previously by re-adapting them to fit into the context of the new work. By constantly reworking certain themes Merck challenges his viewers to detect the threads that characterize his oeuvre as a whole. In terms of the horse-head, the choice – here as well as in the Oedipus' painting – was suggested to Merck by the role that the horse plays in chess, namely in the limited movements that it is allowed to make. Merck identifies himself with the female figure with the horse-head. He wanted thus to represent his own feeling of being in some way limited, if not impeded, in appropriately reacting to and in resisting the 'abduction' in process. Merck envisioned himself as a powerless witness who is

limited in movement: 'I just did not have the tool/faculties/strength with which to meet it head on and reverse the momentum to my advantage'.

[42] Merck's title for this work is a pun, a play on the word 'classic', as a term that references both ancient Greece and Rome and that takes on the ensuing meaning of 'of a well-known type, typical, conforming to established standard'. Indeed, in this latter sense of the word, heroic abductions are 'classic'.

[43] Merck does not tend to assign one, definitive meaning, to his work. He prefers 'the ideas in the picture to be pure and open to interpretation just like the words appear on a page'. He is thus open to multiple readings, and this is reflected in his work which is characterised by multiple, open-ended threads.