Myth on the Wall: Images of Antiquity in Contemporary Street Art

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of artists have produced large-scale, public murals that bring elements of classical antiquity into direct contact with the public street. This article presents a few examples of this practice—Sándor Rácmolnár's *Waiting For A New Prometheus* (Figure 1), MP5's *The Care of Knowledge* (Figure 2) and *The Root of Evil* (Figure 3), PichiAvo's *Leda and the Swan* (Figure 4), and finally Banksy's *Bomb Damage/Niobe* (Figure 5). Pieces such as these fuse the aesthetic strategies of urban artists with the compressive and syncopated narrative capabilities of classical mythology. Such active recombination of images and narratives from antiquity creates fluid connections between the deep past and the popular present. This article examines the way contemporary street artists have formulated such fluid connections to speak to a range of social and political concerns. Recognising the tensions that arise from connecting past and present in this way provides opportunity for reflecting on broader issues of boundaries, accessibility, and authority within Classical Studies.

For each piece of street art presented in this article, I discuss both its classical antecedents and its contemporary implications. To frame this discussion, I have chosen to foreground a different dimension of myth-in-street-art for each piece, although most of these issues arise for all the works in question. *Prometheus* introduces the political dimension of street art and the way that the genre plays with both visual language and physical space to construct multi-layered narratives. This discussion of space and politics continues for *Knowledge* and *Evil*, both of which draw on comparatively obscure classical references, thus raising questions about the education of the viewer, its relevance for acts of reception, and the potential for street art to serve as public pedagogy. *Leda* raises two particularly complicated, polarising issues for Classical Studies as a whole – the omnipresence of polychromy in the ancient world and the responsible discussion of gender violence in reception studies. Finally, the dual-titled *Bomb Damage/Niobe* provides a peculiar example of a most 'democratic' type of reception—one in which the classical referent is assigned not from the top (artist) down, but from the bottom up, via open discussion on social media. The multi-dimensional relationship between the street artist, the audience of the public street, and the classical source material allows for polyvalent meanings to be constructed at the point of reception.

WHAT IS STREET ART?

The term "street art" characterises a creative practice born in the urban counter-cultural and pop art scene of the 1980s and 90s (Lewisohn 2008: 23; Howorth & Croy 2002: 810).[1] As an artistic genre, street art shares a number of aesthetic and conceptual characteristics with its better-known cousin, graffiti. In choice of medium, both graffiti and street art favour paint (Figures 1-3), especially spray paint (Figure 4), magic marker, stencils (Figure 5), and posters (Wacławek 2011: 17ff.). Despite these physical similarities, graffiti tend to prioritise text (such as quickly-executed tags and throw-ups), whereas street *art* tends to prioritise images and iconic symbols (Schacter 2016: 141, n.2 & 3). This priority of image is especially important for understanding classical myth in street art because it corresponds to a narrative strategy well-known to the vase painters and sculptors of (ancient) Greece and Rome: reducing a longer narrative to a few key elements and a single point in time, making long and complicated stories quickly recognisable to the viewer.[2]

Yet, even as it shares narrative strategies with its ancient cousins, contemporary street art is often further defined by its conceptual qualities; it is self-authorised, performative, and seeks communication with the

public at large, rather than the limited audience of the museum or gallery (Blanché 2015: 33). The most debated (and polarising) theoretical aspect of street art, however, is not the intentions of the artist, but the legality of the artwork. For some theorists, such as anthropologist Raphael Schacter, street art must be illicit (Schacter 2016:141, n.2 & 3).[3] Most of the murals I discuss in this paper (with the exception of the Banksy) were constructed legally, in as much as they were commissioned and sanctioned by cultural institutions. Therefore, these pieces might otherwise be characterised as "public art," following the definition promoted by Ulriche Blanché, who argues for distinguishing "street art" from a "public art" that is legal and commissioned.[4] Although Blanché is certainly correct that the issue of legality complicates the distinction between official and unofficial discourse, the large-scale, public murals I discuss in this article are best understood under the framework of street art, with the significance of the commissioning body reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, Blanché emphasises the communicative elements of street art and its relationship with the viewer. From the perspective of audience consumption, the large-scale public works discussed in this article are performative, site-specific, ephemeral, and participatory—all features they share with street art narrowly defined. Furthermore, these pieces participate in the non-traditional occupation of urban spaces in a way that originated from the illegal graffiti subculture. Thus, they should be considered as "street art," a classification that prioritises their physical context and communicative potential.

CLASSICS IN STREET ART?

The significance of "the classical" in contemporary art overall has been the subject of recent exhibits, particularly "Liquid Antiquity," an installation from Princeton University and the Museum of Greek Culture in Athens (Holmes & Marta 2017) and "The Classical Now," at Kings College London (Welch, Levett & Squire 2018). The thoroughness with which both the curators and the artists of these exhibits interrogated ideas of the classical and the contemporary provides a useful conceptual framework, even if the comparative exclusivity of these exhibits distinguishes them from the wider communicative goals of street art. In her contribution to both exhibits, philosopher Brooke Holmes introduces the concept of the *liquidity* of classical antiquity, as a means of forging new relationships between past and present that are not restricted by the "petrifying" iconic power of classical symbols, but rather draw on its generative properties (Holmes 2017: 23-24; cf. Holmes 2018).

Functioning as both a conceptual principle and an organising framework, Holmes' concept of liquidity identifies three interrelated areas—time, body, and institution—through which contemporary artists build new connections between past and present. A concept of temporal liquidity encourages us to explore how classical antiquity both produces and transmits meanings reworked in various social and political contexts that are not directly connected, such as 1990s Berlin and "ancient" Greece (the first case study). In this paper, I operate with a very broad definition of "classical," which I take to mean allusions to any sort of cultural production (artistic, literary, and particularly mythological) from the Mediterranean between roughly 1500 BCE and 500 CE. A narrower definition might restrict "the classical" to simply art from fifth-century Athens. However, a broader understanding of antiquity allows me to set aside the historical specifics of individual allusions—an antiquarian rabbit hole—and instead bring together under the rubric of "classical" examples of street art from various times and places, which contain references to a deep past that gains ("western") cultural capital from its storied tradition of transmission, repetition, reception and scholarship.[5]

The notion of the classical body as a malleable material for building connections between past and present is especially relevant to the study of myth in street art, because each of the murals discussed in this paper use human figures to communicate their narratives. The communicative properties of street art, as well as its counter-cultural heritage, are important for understanding the way these pieces distribute and deploy classical images for contemporary purposes.

In terms of institutions, this liquidity of classical antiquity contributes to the dissolution of divisions of place and differential access that street art highlights, as a function of its site-specific, ephemeral, participatory, and performative qualities. As the genre plays with both visual language and physical space to construct

multi-layered narratives, street art dissolves boundaries between past and present. In addition, many street artists today distribute their work via social media (especially Instagram), lowering geographical and financial barriers to Classical Studies. Street art places tension on the boundaries between things, forcing to our attention the divisions: buildings, bridges, and roads constructed in our environment. Walls especially are the structures that create places, restricting access to the spaces they define, keeping some people, things, and ideas out, and others in. By calling attention to their very presence, street art brings the legitimacy of these boundaries into question. At the same time, the redeployment of simplified classical narratives on the contemporary street creates a variety of implications for how antiquity functions in its new environment.

<div align="center">PROMETHEUS</div>

On Berlin's Mühlenstrasse stands *Waiting For A New Prometheus* (Figure 1) by Hungarian artist Sándor Rácmolnár (b. 1960 in Miskolc). This 1991 mural exemplifies the redeployment of iconic symbols from classical myth on the public street and the way that street art plays with physical space to construct layered, often political, narratives. The mural itself is over seven metres wide and nearly four metres tall, but the figures are simple outlines: four humanoids, rendered in black with a white background. The largest figure, recognisable as human only by its head and foot, is bent nearly horizontal. Three smaller figures stand upon its back, each holding a light-bringing object: the first carries fire, highlighted with added red; the second carefully balances a light-bulb on his head; the third hoists the sun. Although minimalist and contemporary in execution, these light-bearing figures extend a longer narrative with an expansive history—the "classical" Prometheus, the fire-bringer first attested in Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.[6]

Figure 1: *Sándor Rácmolnár "Waiting For A New Prometheus" (1991)*
East Side Gallery, Berlin (Germany)
View from street. Photo by author (05/08/2019)

Prometheus has a long history of reception and re-working in his many guises: from the so-called trickster of Hesiod, to the long-suffering rebel of Aeschylus, through Goethe and Mary Shelley to a more contemporary incarnation during the Cold War, in which the innovative titan became a Marxist symbol of the worker's struggle, and his gift of fire the forward march of progress.[7] Rácmolnár intended the black-and-white, minimalist aesthetic to "over-simplify" his composition, focusing attention on Prometheus as a metaphor: the large figure is a corpse that represents the old socialist political system in East Germany; the three smaller, light-bearing figures represent both constancy and a progressive future for the East German people (personal communication 2018).[8] Thus Rácmolnár's utilisation of specific iconographic elements has reassembled a version of the Prometheus myth that is both reflective and constitutive of the reconfiguring of democracy in Eastern Europe in the later twentieth century.

As street art, this Prometheus-metaphor derives its political intensity not just from its mythological content, but from the work's site-specific properties. Rácmolnár was invited to paint *Prometheus* in 1991, as a member of the Studio of Young Artists in Budapest. Today, it is one of 118 such images that form the East Side Gallery—"the longest open-air gallery in the world"—that adorns the (re-constructed) remnants of the Berlin Wall (Dolff-Bonekämper 2002: 242-244). For twenty-eight years (1961-1989), the GDR erected and maintained a barrier of barbed wire, metal fencing, and eventually pre-fabricated concrete approximately one-hundred and sixty-seven kilometres long (Baker 2007: 27). Thus, *Prometheus* stands—physically and temporally—at the historical and geographical transition from a divided to a united Germany, calling our attention to these boundaries of place, entrance, and time.[9]

Ironically, this concrete barrier became a canvas for protest, as urban artists used graffiti and street art to "symbolically dismantle" the physical border (Ivanova 2013: 149-151).[10] Most famously, American graffiti and pop artist Keith Haring painted his characteristic interlocking human figures—in the red, gold, and black of the German flags—across a 100-metre stretch of the western side of the wall (Ivanova 2013: 150-152). Haring studied semiotics and drew inspiration from mythology, i.e. antiquity, broadly defined (Arauz 2006). The artist described his intention as follows: "[i]t's a humanistic gesture, more than anything else...a political and subversive act—an attempt to psychologically destroy the wall by painting it" (Keith Haring 1985). Pieces like Haring's quickly turned the concrete barriers into a "gallery" of protest art. Installed shortly after reunification, the East Side Gallery empowered young artists with a public canvas at the beginning of a new political era.

As a monumental, outdoor piece, *Waiting For A New Prometheus* is in constant dialogue with both the permanent context of the other murals in the East Side Gallery and the continually shifting perspectives of its visitors. The extent to which individual viewers participate in the reception is similarly slippery and individually dependent, more so because "accessing" classical references could require some level of background knowledge and education, a point I will return to in the following case study on MP5. Sándor Rácmolnár, for example, studied neither Latin nor Greek, nor intended to engage with classical antecedents, although his Prometheus draws on a long tradition and he trained at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts.

Especially for the viewer without an extensive "classical" background, the images can function pedagogically. The "uninformed" viewer might first associate Prometheus with some notion of forward "progress" and only later, if ever, connect it to a "classical" narrative. For *Prometheus*, the visual clues are confirmed by a title that clarifies that the light-bringing figures are contemporary reconfigurations of the "classical" Prometheus, in his guise as the rebel titan who stole fire from the gods. (Although the artist is Hungarian and the piece stands in Berlin, the work is titled in English.) From the perspective of the viewer on the street, however, this corroborating title is difficult to access. Only the name of the artist and the date are painted on the wall; a nearby placard explains the wall's history but doesn't provide a title. Instead, the curious viewer must go an extra step to caption the work, either by referring to the guidebook *Spaziergang an der East Side Gallery* or by navigating one of the websites maintained by the Berlin Wall Foundation and Artists Initiative (Weber 2015).[11]

Over time, the relationship that an individual piece of street art forges with the street can almost take on a life of their own, as we can see with *Prometheus* in its urban environment, beyond the wall. The progressing figures encourage us to look outward and upward—towards progress, towards the future, and, perhaps ironically, towards the Mercedes Benz logo atop the Europa Center (constructed 1963-1965). As a symbol of industry, economy, and capitalism, we can certainly read this as one possible future Prometheus. The potential for such a forward-moving metaphor is facilitated by the long and liquid history of Prometheus in reception. At the East Side Gallery, the *Prometheus* myth re-purposes the place, transforming the Berlin Wall from a zone of demarcation to a heritage monument.

<div align="center">KNOWLEDGE & EVIL</div>

If *Prometheus* uses myth to transform the identity of an old, notorious place, Italian muralist and illustrator MP5 (b. 1980 in Naples) draws on classical narratives to construct and amplify new spaces, connecting ancient stories and contemporary issues.[12] MP5's deployment of antiquity in large-scale public murals, such as *The Care of Knowledge* (Figure 3) and *The Root of Evil* (Figure 4) illustrates the way street art actively contributes to social and political discourse in the public sphere. As these pieces communicate complex and relatively obscure narratives, they raise further questions about the education of the artist, the viewer, and the relevance of "background knowledge" for classical reception.

Figure 2: *MP5 "The Care of Knowledge" (2018)*
Women's Documentation Centre, Naples (Italy)
Photo by artist (MP5)

In 2018, MP5 was commissioned by the Women's Documentation Centre (il Centro Studi Donna di Napoli) to paint outside the Centre's offices in Naples' Spanish Quarter (Saturino 2018). The resulting piece is the larger-than-life figure of a woman kneeling on the street corner, gazing at the astrolabe which floats above her hands. Entitled *The Care of Knowledge*, the minimalist black-and-white composition simplifies the story of Hypatia of Alexandria, the fourth-century philosopher and mathematician who died violently at the hands of men (MP5 2018).[13]

Although a historical personage, not a fictive creature like Prometheus, Hypatia's unusual biography as a female Neoplatonist philosopher has acquired near-mythological status for a woman who "…has been defamed as a witch, marked as a feminist icon, and lionised as a martyr (Watts 2017: 4)." The reception of Hypatia as a victim of gender violence is a particularly appropriate topic for the Women's Centre, because the institution houses an archive about both Italian and international feminist movements, as well as an anti-violence centre (Saturnino 2018). The mural's purpose was to increase the visibility of the Centre and its resources. MP5 plays with the materiality of the building's surface to further this goal—Hypatia's skirt doesn't obey the strictures of the vertical wall, but rather flows around the corner and into the street. The performativity of the work is likely derived from the artist's background in scene design (scenografia), which MP5 studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna (Saturnino 2018). Hypatia's story and the mission of the Women's Centre seep into public view together, filling a gap in the viewer's knowledge of both the classical past and contemporary social resources.

MP5 frames Hypatia's pseudo-myth as one of scientific expertise and the ways women have been denied safe access to such knowledge. Furthermore, MP5's intentional classicism in street art recalls restricted knowledge of another type, namely access and entrance to the classical tradition via the boundary of education in Graeco-Roman studies. In the contemporary "western" world, access and exposure to comprehensive knowledge and artistic depictions of classical mythology is increasingly restricted to the sphere of a privileged few.[14] Yet, the issue of education is at the forefront of Classical Reception Studies. For example, the very first chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to the Classical Tradition* is on "Education" (Stray 2010: 5-14).

As with *Prometheus*, the title *The Care of Knowledge* was not originally available on the public street, although the artist's signature is displayed. Furthermore, even this title doesn't make the classical referent clear – it is necessary to seek out further information to identify Hypatia, via the internet, or perhaps by inquiring inside the Women's Centre. The story behind the name is perhaps even more difficult to identify, illustrating the tension between the public, communicative genre of street art and the traditionally more restrictive discipline of Classics. The primary text of John Malalas' *Chronicle* is comparatively difficult to access and interpret (despite the 1986 edition and translation produced by Jeffreys et al.), although Hypatia has been the subject of a number of recent books, both traditionally academic (Watts 2017) and popular (Deakin 2007), as well as the 2009 film *Agora*.

Despite these potential difficulties in access, the public nature of street art allows it to function as a form of public pedagogy.[15] In the case of *The Care of Knowledge*, the pedagogical aspect has been successful in a particularly obvious way. In March of 2019, the municipality decided to re-name the street along the Women's Centre "Via Ipazia d'Alessandria," noting that she was a philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer, as well as her birth and death dates (*tg24.sky.it* 2019). In Naples, only 5% of the streets are named after female figures, so this re-naming is a small step in the direction of gender equality.

The socio-political intention of the artist is one, if not the only, component in understanding receptions of classical antiquity in street art. However, investigations into an individual artist's classical source material and educational background can be problematic for studying street art. This medium has its roots in the illegitimate, whereas formal education (the means by which one typically studies Classics) is a pathway for mainstream values to be legitimised, while other voices are excluded. The quintessential example of this tension is the work of American graffiti artist and neo-expressionist Jean Michelle Basquiat, who engaged directly with the classical tradition in several of his works (Connolly 2018). In *Jawbone of an Ass* (1982)*,* Basquiat employed big names from Graeco-Roman antiquity – from Homer to Hannibal to Hypatia herself – as a means of critiquing western power structures. Basquiat's knowledge of the classical world was probably not obtained through formal education, as he did not finish high school and was self-taught (Faflick 1978: 41). Thus, his use of the classical tradition, as with the typical street artist's use of space, was self-authorised. Nonetheless, Basquiat used these references to Caesar, etc. to simultaneously suck the authority out of the classical canon and to repurpose whatever power remains for his own aims. MP5 has

done something similar with *Knowledge,* democratising a classical narrative in the service of gender equality.

Liquifying a mythological narrative visually, such that it flows into the urban environment to deliver an explicitly feminist message, is a frequent feature of MP5's work. In *The Root of Evil* the figure of a crouching woman covers the entire side of a house in Abruzzo, painted during the 2014 art and music festival "Peripheral Vision."[16] With *Evil*, the viewer on the street observes a scene both intimate, in the woman's hesitant posture, and open, as black crows swoop from the wall and alight on the surfaces of neighbouring houses. The figure is Pandora, the first woman, and the open box she holds in her hands recalls the *pithos* full of evils that she delivered to humankind (Hesiod *Works & Days* 60ff.).[17]

Figure 3: MP5 "The Root of Evil" (2014)
Mosciano Sant'Angelo, Abruzzo (Italy)
Photo by artist (MP5)

As with *The Care of Knowledge*, *The Root of Evil* presents a problem of translation. Particularly when transferred to a contemporary context, Hesiod's story of the first woman as the source of all the world's sorrows is deeply misogynistic. *The Root of Evil* takes this story and magnifies it for the public street. However, ascribing a misogynist intention to *The Root of Evil* would be inconsistent with the larger context of the artist's work. Currently, MP5 is one of the visual artists partnering with Gucci's philanthropic division "Chime for Change," an organisation that seeks to "benefit the livelihood of girls and women globally" (Dyer 2019: 75-76). With these goals in mind, *The Care of Knowledge* and *The Root of Evil* are both popularizing Classics and positively affecting the artist's community.

LEDA

With their self-referential #urbanmithology, Valencian street art duo PichiAvo introduce classical narratives into the public sphere and reprocessing it with their version of an explicitly "urban aesthetic."[18] PichiAvo's characteristic practice is to "merge Greek sculptures and old-school graffiti," layering bright, neon colours over images of classically-white sculpture (Aruallan: 85-86). The duo regularly produce paintings that cover several stories of a building, such as *Poseidon* (Helsingborg, Sweden 2018) or *Gaia* (Drammen, Norway 2016). In *Leda and the Swan* (Figure 4), produced for the 2018 Glasgow Street Art Festival, the Greek woman reclines softly, cradling the swan-avatar of Zeus in her lap.

Figure 4: *PichiAvo "Leda & the Swan" (2018)*
Glasgow (Scotland)
Photo by artist (PichiAvo)

In terms of artistic precedent, the figural elements of PichiAvo's *Leda and the Swan* seem to be found in Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse's 1870 terracotta of the same name, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum (1980.123). From Carrier-Belleuse (who once employed Auguste Rodin), PichiAvo have adapted the sensuousness of the scene, a quality that Carrier himself sought to imitate from Renaissance examples (Draper 1991-1992: 53). However, the vibrant colours of PichiAvo's contemporary *Leda* provide a liquid connection to Antiquity, one that bypasses the sterile, colourless terracottas and marbles of the intervening periods. The received whiteness of classical sculpture creates a false portrait of the homogeneity of the *people* of the ancient world, stripping antiquity of its diversity (Bond 2019). The brightness of PichiAvo's colours can dissolve some of these boundaries between past and present, reanimating classical people, building liquid connections between past and present, and reinterpreting their historical vibrancy in a distinctly modern way.

Yet, a tension can arise when bringing stories with an ancient past into large-scale view, as with *Leda,* because many Greek myths are structured around acts of violence against women. Presenting mythological figures like Leda in the public sphere as larger-than-life street art has the potential to erase some of the complicated violence and contribute instead to an uncritical nostalgia for an antique past that never quite existed. The problematic interpretation of the *Leda* story within Classical Studies more generally has been recently discussed at length by Four Angry Classicists (2019). The *Leda* narrative is one of deception; Zeus deceives Leda by taking the form of a swan; the product of this union is Helen of Troy (Euripides, *Helen* 17-23).[19] PichiAvo's *Leda and the Swan* extends this tradition of aestheticising mythological narratives and the interpretation of her union with Zeus as both sensual and consensual.

On a visual level, the discomfort that the scene can provoke is illustrated by the case of another *Leda* interpretation, Derrick Santini's 2012 photograph *A Fool for Love*. As reported by the *Telegraph*, at one point, a policeman had Santini's photograph removed from the window of London's Scream Gallery, seemingly for condoning bestiality (Furness 2012). The response from the artist and the *Telegraph* was to shame the policemen for their lack of "culture." Presumably, such a response implies that the Leda story's pedigree as a Greek myth with a long line of receptions from the Renaissance to the present should absolve it from any contemporary disgust. By pulling classical narratives into the contemporary zeitgeist, violent and discomforting scenes can be recontextualised and find new life among public discourse. In the *#MeToo* era, the subject of Leda becomes even more relevant to discussions of gender violence and consent, even if this is not the explicit intention of the artist.

Rather than interrogating the social-political dimensions of *Leda,* PichiAvo's work seems to focus on forming aesthetic connections with antiquity. Most recently, PichiAvo constructed the 85-metre tall neoclassical statue as the *falla* sculpture for the St. Joseph's Day festival in their hometown of Valencia, Spain (Stewart 2019). *Evreka: Procés Creatiu* was first displayed and then burned to the ground in a UNESCO-protected intangible cultural heritage event. In its destruction, PichiAvo's new-neo-classical *falla* accesses the ephemerality of the classical past in the present, serving as a reminder of the frailty of white marble and classical antiquity, despite its seeming permanence, when faced with the destruction of time.

BOMB DAMAGE/NIOBE

Figure 5: *Banksy "Bomb Damage/Niobe" (2015)*
Gaza
Photo by artist (Banksy), [after Pereria 2015].

The dual-titled *Bomb Damage/Niobe* raises questions about how focusing on the "ancient" elements of street art can both enrich and distort its likely intended political message, as well as highlighting the agency of social media for classical reception. On February 26th, 2015 the British-based, anonymous street artist Banksy posted a photo entitled *Bomb Damage* to the account Instagram/banksy.co.uk (Lazic 2015; Vincent 2015). The image of a weeping woman is stencilled in blue on the door of a destroyed house in Gaza (Figure 5). The pose of the veiled figure, with her head in her hand, recalls the weeping woman statue type found in Victorian cemeteries.[20]

The work only gained its classical referent when Instagram user @BanksysTeddy noted the similarities between Banksy's work and the perpetually-weeping Niobe (Vincent 2015).[21] Furthermore, the media seems to have fixated on the classical reference, naming the piece *Niobe* and recounting her tragic narrative (e.g. Pereira 2015; Lazic 2015; Vincent 2015). In turn, and perhaps even because of its classical attribution, *Bomb Damage* was quickly transferred to the art market (Pereira 2015). Thus, *Niobe* provides an idiosyncratic example of a most "democratic" type of reception, one in which the classical referent does not seem to have been explicitly assigned by the artist. Rather, the engagement with classical antiquity has been wholly left to the participation (and perhaps even over-interpretation) of the viewer rather than the direct explication of the artist.

The way that a classical attribution can change the emphasis of a piece of street art should give pause to classicists. At first, the political intention of this Niobe, drawn from the piece's site-specific context, seems straightforward. This grieving mother should call our attention to the suffering documented by the United Nations Country Team in the occupied Palestinian territory, in their United Nations report on the last decade

in Gaza (Piper 2017). UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Aid and Development Activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory describes the situation in Gaza as a "humanitarian and human rights disaster" for the "two million people trapped in this sad reality" (Piper 2017: 2). Banksy need not symbolically dismantle the home with Niobe's image, as it has already been destroyed.

When street art calls attention to the suffering of marginalised communities through political and territorial divisions, a mythological image can provide a short-hand critique and a way of speaking powerfully without words. However, the message can easily be complicated or distorted in translation. Thus, layering this classical myth onto Banksy's wall should introduce a source of uneasiness, especially for classicists. In Graeco-Roman art, the mourning figure of Niobe is well documented (e.g. Trendall 1978). But, this Niobe of Homer and Ovid is the cautionary story of a woman who acted foolishly and suffered tragic consequences. She weeps for her twelve children, who were struck down by Apollo and Artemis as punishment for her reckless boasts about their goddess mother Leto (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI.146ff; *Metamorphoses* VI.305ff). [22] However, it seems wildly unlikely that Banksy wants to communicate the sentiment that the people of Gaza earned their suffering.

Rather than intending to convey a notion of guilt, Banksy's Niobe seems to have been distilled into an abstraction of pure grief, separate from the moralising potential of the classical narrative. *Niobe* appeared in Gaza with other works aimed at drawing global attention at the direness of the humanitarian situation. One of these, a large white kitten stencilled on the wall of a destroyed house, comes with the cynical explanation that people on the internet look only at photos of kittens (Lazic 2015). Similarly, Banksy's continuing work at the "Walled Off Hotel" has a corresponding purpose. [23] Furthermore, Banksy seems to take a rather cynical view of the classical past as a source of inspiration for the present. The street artist has attributed false quotations to Plato as part of the *Better Out Than In* residency, ironically presented Diogenes the Cynic in *One Original Thought*, and even played with Marcus Aurelius via Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*.

Thus, Banksy's *Niobe* highlights how important it is for classicists not to extract the "classical" elements from street art without considering both the site-specific location of the work and the entirety of the artist's oeuvre. Nevertheless, it may be that a further piece of the classical narrative would further Banksy's overall purpose in Gaza. In the *Iliad* (XXIV.609-12), the murdered children of Niobe lie unburied for nine days until the gods themselves lay them to rest; the other mortals who might have helped lessen the carnage have all (literally) been turned to stone. [24] Here, the classical reference makes a poignant addition to Banksy's message – the international observers of *Niobe* (and the suffering in Gaza) should not act like the people turned to stone.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented several scenarios in which contemporary, urban artists are actively bringing Classics to the public street. *Waiting For a New Prometheus* connects the use of mythological images to the early history of street art as an artistic practice of political expression, demonstrating how the deployment of images over time can have a substantive impact on changing the nature of the Berlin Wall from a site of division to one of inclusion. *The Care of Knowledge* demonstrates that the combination of street art and myth can serve as a mutually reinforcing public pedagogy, both democratising Classics and using Classics to build a more egalitarian society. *The Root of Evil* stresses the importance of street art's interpretive context, which in the contemporary world includes the artist's entire body of work and publicly stated positions for interpreting such iconic symbols. The vibrant polychromy of *Leda and the Swan* highlights the false whiteness of some classical receptions, even as the content of the narrative raises issues of the responsible interpretation of violent mythology in the modern world. Finally, Niobe harnesses

the power of street art to focus on the materiality of boundaries, using myth and art to encourage the viewer to look at a situation which they might rather not see.

Each of the case studies presented in this article illustrates a different aspect of the process by which artists are absorbing and transfiguring classical narratives. These processes happen as a consequence of the public network in which street art operates, outside the physical confines of a gallery or lecture hall. Yet, the relationship that is forged between the past and present draws heavily on the constituent elements of so-called "liquid" antiquity – a long-standing and complex engagement with time, bodies, and institutions. As it interacts with the urban environment, puts tension on boundaries physical and psychological, and drinks up the liquidity of antiquity, myth in street art can push us from the present to the future via the past.[25]

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ENDNOTES

[1] The precise meaning and applicability of the term 'street art' is hotly debated within art history and urban studies.

The issues involved are discussed at length in Schacter (2014 & 2017), Blanché (2015), Wacławek (2011), and Lewisohn (2008).

[2] A thorough discussion of the various artistic strategies used to depict myths in ancient art can be found in Woodford (2003). One such example would be the red-figure "bilingual" amphora, Musée du Louvre F204, which depicts Herakles, identified by his symbolic lion skin and club, kneeling at the moment just before he chains the monstrous Cerberus.

[3] Schacter (2016: 155, n. 3) emphasises the illicit element of street art, which he defines as: "[P]ractices of image-making…created using either spray cans, stencils, posters, or a number of further techniques of composition, and undertaken illicitly within our urban environments."

[4] Blanché (2015: 33) provides a definition more focused on the issue of audience reception and participation: "Street art consists of self-authorised pictures, characters, and forms created in or applied to surfaces in the urban space that intentionally seek communication with a larger circle of people. Street art is done in a performative way and often site-specific, ephemeral, and participatory way. Street art is mostly viewed online."

[5] Michael Squire (2018: xii-xiii) provides an introduction to the relationship between the classical and the contemporary in his preface to *The Classical Now.*

[6] The earliest literary mention of Prometheus is Hesiod (*Works & Days* 47-52). As a means of "democratising" Classics, I include both the Greek text and the translation (Evelyn-White 1914) that is freely available online, via the Perseus Project.

ἀλλὰ Ζεὺς ἔκρυψε χολωσάμενος φρεσὶν ᾗσιν, ὅττί μιν ἐξαπάτησε Προμηθεὺς ἀγκυλομήτης. τούνεκ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἀνθρώποισιν ἐμήσατο κήδεα λυγρά· κρύψε δὲ πῦρ: τὸ μὲν αὖτις ἐὺς πάις Ἰαπετοῖο ἔκλεψ᾽ ἀνθρώποισι Διὸς πάρα μητιόεντος ἐν κοΐλῳ νάρθηκι λαθὼν Δία τερπικέραυνον.	*But Zeus in the anger of his heart hid it, because Prometheus the crafty deceived him; therefore he planned sorrow and mischief against men. He hid fire; but that the noble son of Iapetus stole again for men from Zeus the counsellor in a hollow fennelstalk, so that Zeus who delights in thunder did not see it.*

[7] The complex history of Prometheus in reception is the subject of two recent monographs by Carol Dougherty (2006) and Ian Ruffell (2012).

[8] Sándor Rácmolnár was generous enough to discuss his work with me over email in May-July 2018. Mr. Rácmolnár's biography and information about his subsequent work is available on his website: http://racmolnar.com/.

[9] The limitations imposed by the Berlin Wall were not symbolic or metaphorical but physical and restrictive – specifically to stem the flood of 2.9 million East German citizens, who crossed the border between 1949 and 1961 (Baker 2007: 24). Quite ironically, although this particular urban environment motivated artistic expressions of resistance, that very cultural production now requires the persistence of the boundaries it once sought to dissolve. A number of recent publications have critiqued the so-called heritage industry of Berlin Wall memorials, with charges of Disneyfication, insufficient authenticity, and the commodification of nostalgia, e.g. Dolff-Bonekämper (2002), Dreschel (2010), Frank (2016), Harrison (2011), Ivanova (2013), and Ladd (1998).

[10] These political uses of graffiti and street art should be considered as part of the wider contemporary artistic culture discussed by Mesch (2008) and Pitrowski (2009), among others.

[11] Several different resources document the murals of the East Side Gallery: Weber (2015), the website of the East Side Gallery Artist's Initiative (Künstlerinitiative 2019), and the Google Arts & Culture repository maintained for the Berlin Wall Foundation (Berlin Wall Foundation 2019).

[12] A biography and portfolio of MP5 is available on the artist's website: www.mpcinque.com.

[13] The episode of Hypatia's death is described by John Malalas (*Chronicle* XIV.12, tr. Jeffreys et al. 1986).

Κατ᾽ἐκεῖνον δὲ τὸν καιρὸν παρρησίαν λαβόντες ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐπισκόπου οἱ Ἀλεξανδρεῖς ἔκαυσαν φρυγάνοις αὐθεντήσαντες Ὑπατίαν τὴν περιβόητον φιλόσοφον, περὶ ἧς μεγάλα ἐφέρετο. ἦν δὲ παλαιὰ γυνή	*At that time the Alexandrians, given free reign by their bishop [Cyril], seized and burnt on a pyre of brushwood Hypatia the famous philosopher, who had a great reputation and who was an old woman.*

[14] The issue of elitism, education, and the classical past has been the subject of a number of recent articles and op-eds, including: Stead & Hall (2015) and the online archive "*The People's History of Classics*" curated by the same authors.

[15] Johnston (2015) explores the ways street art in both Egypt and Ireland has served a pedagogical function in translating political issues and experiences for public consumption.

[16] Levy (2014). The street art festival "Visioni Perifreriche" (Peripheral Vision) was organised in August 2014 by the art and music collective "Dimensioni Bastarde" in the Comune di Mosciano Sant'Angelo. http://dimensionibastarde.tumblr.com.

[17] Pandora opens the box of evils, bringing misery upon humankind: (Hesiod, *Works & Days* 95-96, tr. More 1922).

ἀλλὰ γυνὴ χείρεσσι πίθου μέγα πῶμ᾽ ἀφελοῦσα ἐσκέδασ᾽ ἀνθρώποισι δ᾽ ἐμήσατο κήδεα λυγρά.	*But the woman took off the great lid of the jar with her hands and scattered, all these and her thought caused sorrow and mischief to men.*

[18] A biography of the artists and a portfolio are available on their website: www.pichiavo.com.

[19] As Four Angry Classicists (2019) point out, Zeus initiated this encounter with a trick (*dolon*) in Euripides (*Helen* 17-23), (tr.) Coleridge (1938).

ἔστιν δὲ δὴ λόγος τις ὡς Ζεὺς μητέρʼ ἔπτατʼ εἰς ἐμὴν Λήδαν κύκνου μορφώματʼ ὄρνιθος λαβών, ὃς δόλιον εὐνὴν ἐξέπραξʼ ὑπʼ αἰετοῦ δίωγμα φεύγων, εἰ σαφὴς οὗτος λόγος: Ἑλένη δʼ ἐκλήθην. ἃ δὲ πεπόνθαμεν κακὰ λέγοιμʼ ἄν.	*But there is indeed a story that Zeus flew to my mother Leda, taking the form of a bird, a swan, which accomplished the deceitful union, fleeing the pursuit of an eagle, if this story is true. My name is Helen; I will tell the evils I have suffered.*

[20] The grave of magician Harry Houdini in Machpelah Cemetery, New York, United States has one such example of this statue type.

[21] @BanksysTeddy appears to be a private Instagram user and Banksy enthusiast named 'Sally.' However, Sally's connection to Banksy could be more extensive, given that the account is also credited with the initial discovery of the new painting 'Mobile Lovers' in Bristol, as reported in *The Washington Post* by Dewey (2014).

[22] The portrayal of Niobe's stony grief in Ovid (*Metamorphoses* VI.303-312, tr. More 1922) is particularly vivid:

Nullos movet aura capillos, *in vultu color est sine sanguine, lumina maestis* *stant inmota genis, nihil est in imagine vivum.* *Ipsa quoque interius cum duro lingua palato* *congelat, et venae desistunt posse moveri;* *nec flecti cervix nec bracchia reddere motus* *nec pes ire potest; intra quoque viscera saxum est.* *Flet tamen. Et validi circumdata turbine venti* *in patriam rapta est. Ibi fixa cacumine montis* *liquitur, et lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant.*	*The breeze not even moved her fallen hair,* *a chill of marble spread upon her flesh,* *beneath her pale, set brows, her eyes moved not,* *her bitter tongue turned stiff in her hard jaws,* *her lovely veins congealed, and her stiff neck* *and rigid hands could neither bend nor move.—* *her limbs and body, all were changed to stone.* *Yet ever would she weep: and as her tears* *were falling she was carried from the place,* *enveloped in a storm and mighty wind,* *far, to her native land, where fixed upon* *a mountain summit she dissolves in tears,—* *and to this day the marble drips with tears.*

[23] The "Walled Off Hotel" is a project of Banksy's located in Bethlehem, Palestine, that combines a hotel and gallery space for Palestinian artists. Its purpose seems to be to ironically call attention to the West Bank Separation Barrier (Fisher 2017). www.walledoffhotel.com.

[24] Homer *Iliad* XXIV.609-612 describes this burial (tr. Murray 1924):

οἳ μὲν ἄρʼ ἐννῆμαρ κέατʼ ἐν φόνῳ, οὐδέ τις ἦεν κατθάψαι, λαοὺς δὲ λίθους ποίησε Κρονίων: τοὺς δʼ ἄρα τῇ δεκάτῃ θάψαν θεοὶ Οὐρανίωνες.	*For nine days' space they lay in their blood, nor was there any to bury them, for the son of Cronos turned the folk to stones; howbeit on the tenth day the gods of heaven buried them.*

[25] This is a paraphrase of contemporary American artist Adam Pendelton (2017), who said that Black Dada can be "a way to talk about the future, while talking about the past."