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Is the Use of Mythology in the Western Film Industry Cultural Appropriation, or is it part of Western Civilisation's Heritage?

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BA Hons Costume Interpretation with Design, Level 6



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In today's western culture, film and television is one of the main economic factors and aspects of daily life. Large conglomerate studios produce a multitude of films a year, each with original or sourced stories that companies believe will be the most financially successful. This need for material gain makes the industry driven by quick turn overs, rather than committing time and effort to individual projects. This lack of care has made it a difficult industry in which to accurately portray the stories and cultures of others. This essay will specifically be looking at the use of mythology from a few of the past civilisations such as the Ancient Greeks, Egyptians and the Vikings, to determine whether, given how the centre of civilisation has changed in terms of geography and cultures, the use of these characters and stories for monetary gain is cultural appropriation or part of western societies heritage.

Over the course of humankind, societies and cultures have changed enormously. Looking at how empires and the centre of civilisation's changes have meant that overtime different countries have adopted areas of other cultures. If you were to look back down someone's ancestry it's highly likely that ancestors from previous empires such as the British, Viking, Roman and Greek to name a few, would be common among the wider population. The issues facing societies in the modern day is the use of another's culture for personal gain, this is referred to as cultural appropriation. However, if you can trace your past back to these time from which you want to reference, is this just part of your individual heritage or exploiting the culture as you are not an active participant of their philosophies and beliefs?

In exploring this topic, areas such as globalisation, colonialism, post-modernism, cultural appropriation and heritage theories will be look at to come to an informed decision. Case studies will then be introduced as a way of analysing their portrayals of such events, or stories, in terms of accuracy with original source materials; namely *Jason and The Argonauts* (1963). It's particularly important to look at such topics as globalisation and colonialism given the Earth's bloody and complex history as to which civilisation thought themselves higher than others and as to what aspects of their culture, they enforced upon these, what they considered lesser, cultures. Such events as these would therefore change the enslaved society's original beliefs and stories to appease their oppressors. A key example of such a thing was the Roman invasion/take-over of the Ancient Grecian Empire and traditional Greek existence.

On the other hand, examples including the Vikings can also be classified as invaders and yet their stories and mythologies are still remembered and told in relevant accuracy, especially given that

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believers in the Norse religion were mostly converted to Christianity via those in the upper classes as a way of control meant that the growing Viking population lost a lot of its history and heritage. This is the beginning point of the essay as it will inform and set the base tone for how the rest of the essay will be referred to in terms of global relevancy.

Globalisation is predominantly referred to as the process by which the world becomes more interconnected as a result of increased trade and different cultures interacting and growing. The model of globalisation can often be problematic as it can be associated with cultural Americanization which often infers that the American culture is singular and monolithic, with little influence from other countries, areas or societies. George Ritzer (1999, pg.228) states that '*while we will continue to see global diversity, many, most, perhaps eventually all of those cultures will be affected by American exports: America will become virtually everyone's "second culture"*' which plays on the idea that individual cultures are primarily their own individual section and that cross-culturalisation is a fatal moment in which globalisation has been injected and contaminated the afore mentioned culture, along with its principals of individuality and its beliefs. This view places a lot of blame and responsibility onto imperialism and colonisation of the western world as Edward Said (1993, pg.229) also theorised that:

[A]ll cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, [...] no one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are now [no] more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale.

While these ideas of culture and race can be seen as labels of a person's identity or used as a way of identifying communities of similar people, it can be dangerous to believe that these are solely labels as often these 'labels' have a history behind them. The heritage of labels such as White and Black for example have, heavy and complex meanings and being associated with either, often carries a lot of history around such words.

As a result, globalisation is a large debate in society as some welcome the changes and learning experiences that new influences bring, whilst others are resistant to cultural hybridity as they see it as cultural contamination and want to keep their cultural 'roots'; Hall (1991) stated '*there is always a dialectic, between the local and the global*'. On the other hand, globalisation has also begun to be driven by people searching for family heritage, a practise mainly growing in Europe and

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America, as a way of having a secure past that they can then establish their identities on in the present day (Storey, 2021, pg.230).

However, opposition comes as a response to colonialism; defined as the acquisition of a countries political construct to control its civilians and economically exploit it. The Frontier Theory put forward by Frederick Jackson Turner (1893), shows how this colonialistic view can be extensively damaging on other cultures stating that *'frontier had meant that every American generation returned "to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line." [...] "the meeting point between savagery and civilization"'* looking at these theories in terms of this paper, it puts forward the idea that cross-cultural contamination is a negative experience that creates conflicts and changes to the two, plus, civilisations. Especially, with the Americanisation of other countries be it first or third world, they are all eventually changed in slightly via the interaction with the American Culture. This presents a strong argument for cultural appropriation when large film studios take these stories and mythologies from other countries histories and heritage, which they then apply their own cultures idealistic views onto them.

Cultural appropriation is an ongoing discussion in society given how civilizational convergence has grown in the past few decades. It centres on the idea that individual's identities are based in their heritage and cultural history. This is often represented in symbolic areas of their appearances, such as cornrows in the hair, tribal tattoos, or headwear like a Viking kransen, to name a few. The appropriation of these symbols either for aesthetic reasons or monetary gain, without knowing the history and meaning or accurately representing that culture is what's considered offensive and what causes the issues. Alternatively, Stella Jackson's ideas on heritage theory profess;

cultural heritage studies [have] led to an understanding that heritage is a cultural construct, its significance being ascribed to it in the present rather than being an intrinsic quality. We also now recognise that individuals, groups and communities ascribe significance to heritage sites for a variety of different, and often competing, reasons. (Jackson, 2019)

This suggests that these objects/symbols are modern representations that have the historical meanings projected onto them. A theory that works with Frith and Horne's (1987 pg.231) theory of Postmodernism, where they state that, *'In the end the postmodern debate concerns the source of meaning, not just its relationship to pleasure (and, in turn, to the source of that pleasure) but its relationship to power and authority.'* And as such when looking at cultural appropriation it's important to link in post modernism into the discussion as it dislodges modern stances on what is

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considered to be 'modern' and comments on the representation of such elements in terms of meaning and relevancy in the current times. It comes down to how symbols are being used and by whom. If a large company uses them, is it up to the audience to interpret the meaning behind the images. As this can be problematic. Should the person viewing these cultural symbols not be aware of their meaning and significance, there is potential for them to copy what they are being shown and hence appropriate these elements, which is easily done in the current day, especially with merchandising for film and TV.

Looking at *Marvel's Black Panther* (2018), the film, whilst based in fantasy, drew inspiration and cultural aspects of different African tribal cultures in a respectful way and is generally believed by the wider population to have been an accurate representation, with different symbolic features without losing their meanings and significance. And whilst it was produced by a large company those that were involved with making the film had a strong heritage and cultural connection with what they were trying to represent; linking this to Frith and Horne's ideas, it had these meanings but were respected by those with the power and authority and as such didn't become an example of cultural appropriation. In terms of post modernism though, this film then went on to have merchandise produced and as such some elements of tribal stylings were used as monetary gain by the company and therefore was once again bordering on the line of capitalism at the expense of a minority. Having studied these themes they will now be applied to the film industry by exploring case studies against the cultures from which the mythology has come from.

The first film to be analysed is *Jason and The Argonauts* (1963) directed by Don Chaffey and distributed by Columbia Pictures. Based on the Greek story of Jason and the Golden Fleece it centres on Ancient Greek mythology in terms of plot and characters. For this analysis the costume and character representation shall be the primary focus and will be looked at against imagery sourced from around the time period that these stories would have been told. Given that the main cast and crew of this film were comprised of British and American people, there are no Grecian influences involved in the production of this film other than that of the overall storyline.

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Figure 1: The God Hermes portrayed by Michael Gwynn. Still from Jason and The Argonauts dir. Don Chaffey, 1963

Firstly, the representation of the Gods, specifically Hermes, the god of roads, thieves, and messenger of the gods warrants further discussion. Hermes is one of the main twelve Olympians that were believed to watch over Greece. In this Figure 1 he is clearly dressed in Hermes symbolic winged helmet, with his Caduceus with intertwined snakes and topped with the spread wings. The wings are symbolic of Hermes speed and duties as the Gods messenger, the snakes (in one version of the mythology) are an ode to his half-brother Apollo and were a gift of friendship between them. As for relevancy to this paper, it does well to accurately represent the Grecian cultures version of the god. However, when looking at the chiton and costuming of the vase illustration by Iris Brooks in her seminal publication, *Costume in Greek Classic Drama*, published in 1962 (Figure 2), it's clear to see the modern interpretations of Ancient Greek clothing upon it.

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Figure 2: Illustration of Hermes in Iris Brooks *Costume in Greek Classic Drama*. (1962) London: Methuen & Co.p.

During this time period fabric was weaved in large rectangles on a loom, and as such patterning of any kind was usually reserved for the edging. On the 1963 version it is shown across the chest, where it would not have been woven into the fabric, but this has clearly been printed onto the white fabric. Additionally, the shoulder clasps from the film that are supposed to hold and shape these rectangles of fabric (as seen in Brooks' illustration, Figure 2), are clearly being used for decoration to cover a seam, as these clasps would otherwise be creating a draped effect like that from the illustration.

As with modern costuming, Greek theatre costumes also heavily relied on colour to connote to the audience different meanings. In Pollux's writings about the Ancient Grecian plays he states frequently that the normal costume for the tragic actor was a white Doric chiton with no seam on the left side [...] that young men wore purple or red; old men white, as did young women and priestesses. Parasites wore black or grey, old women green or light blue. (Brooke, 1962 pg.15).

Whilst Pollux does state that white was used for costumes it is highly likely that the costumes for the 1963 film are mostly based of the Grecian stereotype of white clothing, that was founded on the principal that most artefacts and statues from the period are white. This has also been

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disproven as there was a trend in the Victorian era of whitewashing and stripping statues of their colours so that they looked 'clean' and fit better with Victorian societies ideas and beliefs. Prior to this, statues from the Greek Empire had been painted and dyed in a variety of dyes; scientists in the modern-day which have done analysis on a few samples from statues have found dye fragments that indicate that these statues were originally decorated.

Another *Jason and The Argonauts* character that should be discussed is Jason, focusing mostly on his armour (Figure 3). Whilst the costuming follows the basis of the Greek armour with the white cotton apron sitting underneath and the leather breastplate, known as a cuirass, it makes up the distinctive armour silhouette and style that audiences will easily associate as Greek armour (Figure 5). The cuirass seems to be made from a type of leather, which there is some evidence for in illustrated battle scenes that appear on vases from this period. However, there's no example of an authentic breastplate and they could have also been made from a type of bronze such as the example in Figure 4; so, in terms of colouring there is no set precedent.



Figure 3: Jason portrayed by Todd Armstrong. Still from *Jason and The Argonauts* dir. Don Chaffey, 1963

On the other hand, the dark colouring is representative of the use of negative space on Greek pots to highlight the detail of the peoples clothing. Conversely, there is evidence for detailing on the cuirass and most commonly it is found that striped or checked contrasting metallic motifs are used

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more than the use of animal imagery (Brook, 1962 pg.37). As for accuracy in representing the Greek cultures historical armour it seems to have been made as close as possible to what evidence there was to inform it. To further this point the sword's sheath is true to the period and shows how historically they were traditionally worn.

The Romans wore their sheaths around the waist, and thus creating the misconception that this was how sheaths were worn. Traditional Grecian armour didn't usually feature a sword as the Greek's were spearmen (Brook, 1962 pg.39), however should one be carried, its sheath was to be worn on a strap across the cuirass with the scabbard on the left under the arm so that the sword was drawn with the right hand at elbow height. This small detail that the film demonstrates shows that the film makers conducted research into the historical accuracy of ancient Grecian culture, meaning that areas that did not fit with the evidence that was available, shows that Americanization and global influences have affected aspects of the production in order to entice and fit with its western audiences' ideals.

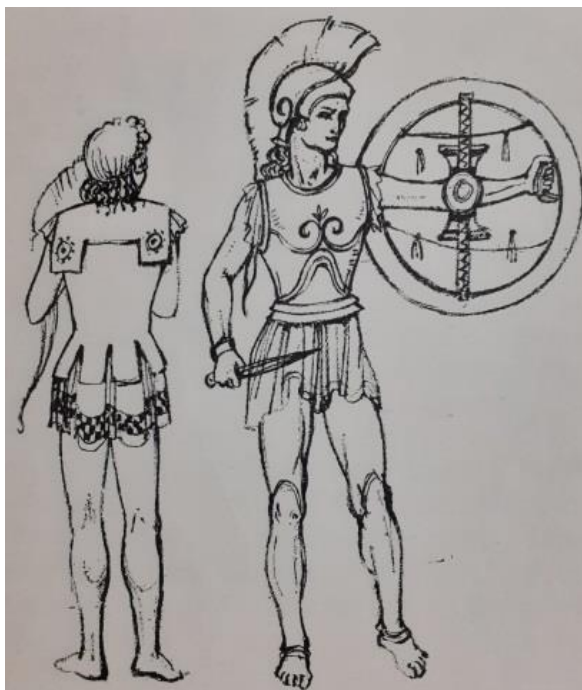


Figure 4: Illustration in Iris Brooks *Costume in Greek Classic Drama*. (1962) London: Methuen & Co.p.



Figure 5: Illustration in Iris Brooks *Costume in Greek Classic Drama*. (1962) London: Methuen & Co.p.

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In comparison, *Jason and The Argonauts*' representation of Greek mythology and Disney's animated film *Hercules* from 1997, for example, have very different depictions. Comparing these two films is a way of seeing how other large companies have used and profited from these mythological stories. The *Hercules* film has a target audience of young children and given that it is an animated film it can't include the same level of detail so is reliant on silhouette and texture. As for Hercules' costume (see Figure 6) it features the cuirass, with the flared panel sections at the bottom; however, these are used more as part of the tunic underneath. This supposed tunic that should sit under the breastplate, doesn't show around the arms either, and yet there is a cape which was more of a Roman styling. Considering that the film is set within the realm of Greek mythology it seems to draw more influences from Roman history and mythology instead; this is furthered by the point that the Greek name should be Heracles who is the original figure from mythology; Hercules was what the Roman's renamed him when they took over the Greek Empire.



Figure 6: Hercules and Megara. Still from Disney's *Hercules*, 1997

This miscommunication only plays to the stereotypes and does little to change them, especially given the brand's influences. The monetary value of this film additionally plays to the fact that the stories were appropriated, and the producers had little interest in representing the culture well, unlike that of the film makers of *Jason and The Argonauts*, that whilst didn't have people from the Greek culture working on the film, still managed to make a respectful representation of the subject matter.

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As a conclusion to this essay and the ideas within, it perhaps comes down to the viewpoint from which the viewer is looking. When looking at the conglomerates themselves then that's when the subject of power and privilege can be applied and can easily be labelled as cultural appropriation as these companies do use these cultural stories for monetary gain as is a large factor of American culture – capitalism. However, if you are to look at the individuals writing and making these productions then it's important to look at their cultural identities rather than the overarching group making the film, as individuals whose heritage is being represented could result in a film that's much more inclusive and an accurate portrayal to a certain extent.

However, as the study into *Jason and The Argonauts* has shown, it is plausible for those that aren't linked to the culture to accurately make a film production that represents said culture and its history well. Yet this can be dependent on the companies in charge such as Disney, as the company rarely produce a film that fairly represents the culture that they are using or accurately demonstrates their relief. This also fits with the Americanization and cross-culturalisation that was discussed within the paper, as it is a highly influential American brand that takes minority cultures and creates money from them. Though, in some cases, mostly modern films that are being made, Disney has worked with people from said cultures as a way of including them and not culturally appropriating them. Although, this approach didn't work when they made the live action *Mulan* (2020), where they had production cast and crew with a Chinese heritage in order to have more of an influence and representation, but the film still appropriated the story and character to fit the company's ideas.

Overall, in the industry when using mythological subject matter, there is always a basis for it in historical areas. As such should be heavily research in to, in order to avoid inaccuracies that could offend or misinform the audience. This misinformation and representation are what causes the most harm to the culture that it references. The responsibility also lies on the audiences understanding of different cultures and shows that upbringing is important in the awareness and inclusivity of different cultures is important. Theorists such as Stuart Hall, Edward Said and George Ritzer have evaluated modern representations and societal constructs to help question popular perceptions and open channels of communication and bring change to subjects that need to be addressed. The importance of heritage, whilst a large subject now, is all relative as to how an individual views themselves, rather than what society projects onto them. Productions that deal with topics that people define themselves by must be handled delicately and with proper reasoning behind choices that make sense and work in line with the topic at hand.

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