

**AUPPF Congress 2022 – Psychic suffering in dark times –
STORYLINE**



A depiction of Caravaggio's *Medusa* is flanked by *Black Medusa* and *White Medusa*, both by Koen Vanmechelen, at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy, January 28, 2022. Photo: Clara Vannucci / The New York Times.

Methodology, when anchored in the expressive aesthetic paradigm, welcomes interdisciplinarity between various types of knowledge. That is why the reference to the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence, Italy – which recently hosted an exhibition by Koen Vanmechelen, a contemporary and multidisciplinary Belgian artist who focuses on the relationship between nature and culture –, is timely. *Seduzione* ran until March 20, 2022, and presented huge horned iguanas, a crouching red tiger and a reimagined Medusa with open-beaked animals and sharp teeth on its head, all created expressly for the museum's salons. Thus, we would like to join these clues and signs (Carlo Ginzburg) with others that we collected in flashback in a meeting with political scientist F. Jameson at the invitation of Cândido Mendes de Almeida. He observed that there are new and original processes occurring at the present time (1991)¹: **I** – penetration and colonization: of the unconscious and of nature. **II** – destruction of the “Third World's” pre-capitalism agriculture by the coexisting Green Revolution and the maintenance of the latifundia. **III** – the rise of media and industry in advertising. Since then, the present time has become more robust and darker, following both the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic's planetary pull, and the war in Ukraine. Therefore, there are two signs of the times in which we live to determine new shadows and masking of meanings...

¹ Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991.

The issue of nature is evoked in Vanmechelen's artistic work in a double context as to Jameson's observations, both as an analytical proposal and in reference to what links it with Sebastião Salgado's exhibition on the Amazon, at SESC in São Paulo (since February 2022) and which will be at Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Tomorrow in July. The postmodernism that invades the present time goes back to surrealism. Of course, both are surrounded by racist, angry conservatism and conservative liberalism, loaded with hate and resentment. The friend versus foe duality makes up the scene.

Let us recall the legend of Medusa, who comes to us from Greek mythology as a monster in the body of a woman. Instead of hair, intertwined snakes – evoking a being that produces fear, but is seductive. Medusa was a gorgon in Greek mythology. She had a monstrous shape and snakes on her head, instead of hair, that could be mistaken for disheveled hair. She was known to turn anyone who looked directly into her face, to decipher her, into stone. The expression Medusa comes from the Greek “who reigns with fatal power.” She was the daughter of two sea deities, Phorcys and Ceto, and was one of the three Gorgons. Medusa combines nature and culture.

The figure of Medusa allows us to see gender as one of the most current issues in the contemporary world, in which women's rights are established, but always under a dark cover and shadows that mask constant misogyny.² She is frequently reified and at the same time retains the woman in the place of a seductress, but always with ulterior motives. Women are represented with certain contempt, thus establishing an aversion to women centered on a sexist perception that places them in the background or in inferiority, highlighting their “supposed incompleteness.”

Hence the constant violence that insinuates itself against women in the postmodernist culture we live in. Also, often, perverse practices are carried out against women, some resulting in femicide; although perversion, structurally, can cross the issue of gender. A reflection on the relative autonomy of culture and language is proposed, since it becomes autonomy itself, and of aesthetics, reduplicating the world without being totally part of it... In postmodernism, the signifier and the signified are separated, but in terms of the penetration of the reification that permeates the sign itself. Therefore, it is no longer possible to speak only of economic determination in the exclusive and strict sense. Meaning is problematized and we are faced with the random game of signifiers.

The *Medusa* by Caravaggio (1596/1597) is a gilded carving, measuring 48 x 58 cm. Two versions are believed to have been painted. The first version is also known as *Murtola* – after the poet who wrote about the work, Gaspare Murtola (died 1624): “Flee, for if your eyes are petrified in fascination, she will turn you to stone.” The second version (60 x 55 cm) is signed Michel A. F., from which is deduced, in Latin: Michel Angelo Fecit, “Michel Angelo did (this)” and is currently kept in the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence. Perhaps the existence of two carvings of Caravaggio's *Medusa* suggested to Koen Vanmechelen that she, Caravaggio's *Medusa*, was exposed flanked by *Black and White Medusas*, as if submitting the issue of racism, subsumed by the issue of gender... Maybe making the gender issue more banal (!?). The serious faces of the *Black and White*

² This is one of the strongest reasons for Hélène Cixous' (1975) reflection in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, translated into Portuguese by Natalia Guerellos and Raísa França Bastos, Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Time Bazaar, 2022.

Medusas that flank Caravaggio's Central Medusa would seem to contradict the hysterical and tonic face of the central Medusa. New dark shadows?

Sigmund Freud wrote *Medusa's Head* (1922), published posthumously in 1940³. Freud observed in the mythological figure both the origin of the "castration complex" (symbolic plane) and the "petrification" of the most genuine affections. Still in Greek mythology, Medusa brought to herself the fear of everyone capable of facing her. However, after being cursed by Athena, she supposedly took refuge in the darkness and made access to her difficult and was killed by Perseus (her severed head). Don't forget that in the psychoanalytic interpretation suggested by Freud, the female genitalia (that is, the mother's) placed in Athena's armor gave her the power to make her untouchable, repelling any sexual desire or thought whatsoever.⁴

The issues of customs, sexuality, gender, religion, structural racism, the legitimate rights of women, social insubmission or non-conformity, sovereignty and autonomy appear or reappear as a range of significant topics in the present day, and there are several others... In the hierarchy of the prevailing values of capitalism, it is clear that the supreme place will be occupied by the technology of reproduction, synthesis of the new computerized or digital technologies. (Mis)information itself converted into merchandise. That is, consumption of the consumption process itself, far beyond the contents of its most immediate commercial products. The introduction of 5G in telecommunications is an example of what we are addressing. However, the avatars of culture and aesthetics configure a formidable backdrop to understand the present time, in which the inhuman seems to seduce the human...

In sum, perhaps aesthetics can increasingly provide a vision capable of neutralizing the inhumanity present in humans. On the other hand, the *Imaginários Amazônicos* by Maria Martins, including *Medusa's Head*, can maybe reach the goals of Davi Kopenawa – who draws attention to the mining that is destroying the Amazon Forest and the indigenous people who inhabit it, especially the Yanomami, but not only them.⁵

³ Freud, Sigmund. *A cabeça da Medusa*. V XIII, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Imago, 1996.

⁴ Jorge, Marco A. Coutinho. *Fundamentos da Psicanálise de Freud a Lacan: a clínica da fantasia*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Zahar, 2010.

⁵ Kopenawa, Davi e Albert, Bruce (Authors), Perrone Moisés, Beatriz. (Translators), Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, 2015.