

Is this the dawning of the Age of Asterion?

Anthropogenic Global Warming as a Retelling of the Myth of Pasiphaë

‘As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.’ (Carl Jung)

Myth has been defined in the works of the great anthropologist Joseph Campbell as that which coordinates the human individual to their own life and to the society with which they live, and which coordinates both the individual and the collective to the environment- this ‘darkness of mere being’ in which we find ourselves.¹ Confronted with this darkness, humanity is driven to tell stories through which we create meaning: stories that help transform the chaos of the universe into order and replace its implacable, illimitable, indifference with a human face. Through myth, we seek to reduce the universe to something that can be encompassed by our human intellect. Clearly, the narrative of anthropogenic global warming fulfills the functions of a myth. It brings order to the chaotic sense impressions provided by the universe, it gives meaning to the actions of the individual within the context of their environment, and it provides a focus for collective action to give cohesion to society.

It can be argued that there is no such thing as a ‘new myth’, only a continual re-telling of archetypal stories; and without necessarily endorsing this argument, the goal of this essay is to consider the anthropogenic global warming myth as a manifestation in the 21st century of one of the most multi-layered and ancient myths of Western civilisation, the story of Pasiphaë, Queen of Crete and daughter of the Sun, and the white bull of Poseidon.^{2,3} The version of the myth that has come down to us from the Greeks begins on familiar territory: an insult delivered by human authority figures to the anthropomorphised forces of climate. Minos, King of Crete, asserts his merely human authority in the face of Poseidon, God of the Sea, by refusing to sacrifice the perfect white bull he had asked Poseidon to grant him. In response, Poseidon punishes Minos by having Aphrodite cause Pasiphaë, wife of Minos, to fall in love with the bull. To satisfy her lust, Pasiphaë in turn has Daedalus, the archetype of all scientists, construct an artificial cow in which she can conceal herself and mate with the bull. From this unnatural connection is born Asterion, the Minotaur. This half-human, half-bull hybrid devours human flesh and must be concealed in a labyrinth to hide the shame of the House of Minos.

Ultimately, the myth is thought to arise from pre-Hellenic Cretan civilisation, where the bull was worshipped as a symbol of virility. In Hellenistic and Latin times, Pasiphaë came to be considered a figure of mockery and titillation, and the Minotaur nothing but an evil monster, but the echoes of pre-Hellenic Cretan rites that we can clearly see in the story of Pasiphaë show that the story was originally seen in a much more positive light, as a myth embodying the reharmonisation of the relations between humanity and nature. It is through consideration of these two competing narratives that the parallels between the myth of Pasiphaë and the myth of anthropogenic global warming becomes overwhelming.



The identity of Pasiphaë with the 'tree-hugging' elements of society is eloquently expressed in Henri Matisse's serigraph, 'Pasiphaë Embracing an Olive Tree'.

The anthropogenic global warming narrative, like the Pasiphaë myth, begins with an insult delivered by the patriarchal establishment to the order of nature. Rejecting the appropriate passive role of humanity as a harmonious part of the natural scheme, modern technological capitalism, like King Minos, seeks to impose its own laws and twist the products of nature to its own purposes. In neither version of the myth does the patriarchal establishment repent of its action: instead, it is left to the more feminine side of society, embodied in Queen Pasiphaë, daughter of the Sun, to seek to redress the wrong. Important in both embodiments of the myth is that alone, the feminine element is impotent to take action to appease the God of the Sea. It is only through the actions of Daedalus, science, that the desire of Pasiphaë to re-harmonise the relations of humanity and nature can be realised. Daedalus normalises Pasiphaë's desires, unnatural and confronting as they are to the patriarchal hierarchy, and makes possible their realisation. In the same way, it is the 'scientific consensus' that validates the unfocused longing of the

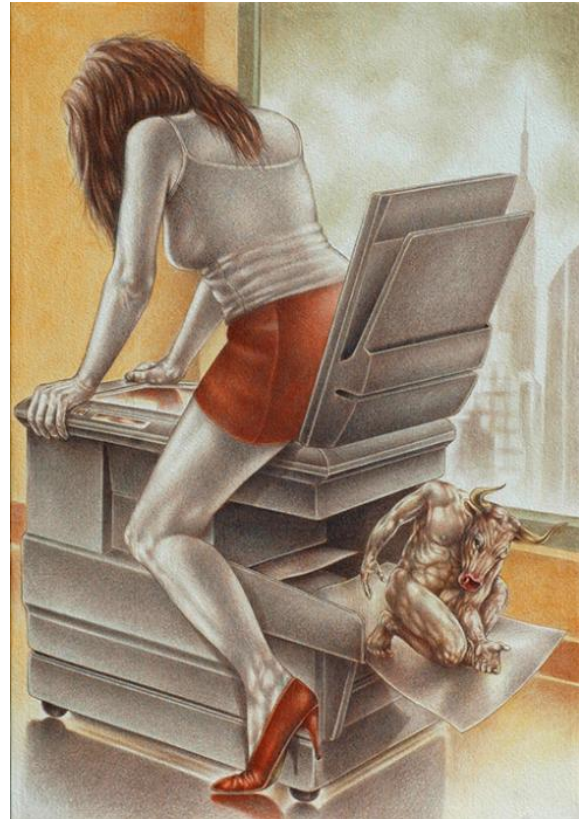
environmentalist to put themselves in a subservient position to the forces of nature, and provides them with the conceptual cow in which they can achieve their apotheosis, returning (if only temporarily) to a dehumanised state of passive acceptance of virile natural forces.

To the greenhouse skeptic, inheritor of the gross characterisation of Pasiphaë in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, claims of anthropogenic global warming are as preposterous as the initial demand of Poseidon, the longing of large elements of society to surrender to these claims is a sign of their renunciation of humanity, and the actions of the scientific community in validating their degradation are an act of folly, on a par with the other archetypal instance of scientific hubris attributed to Daedalus, the attempt to fly that led to the death of his son Icarus. The greenhouse believer, inheritor of the original Cretan version of the myth, identifies completely with Pasiphaë. Rather than resenting the curse of Poseidon, the believer accepts these desires as a sign that they have transcended the outworn strictures of the past, and attains ecstatic fulfillment in bringing about this mystical reconciliation between humanity and nature.

The physical embodiment of this reconciliation is Asterion, the Minotaur. The masculine side of society, like King Minos, rejected the original demands of nature/Poseidon, but it cannot avoid the results of Pasiphaë's actions. The conception of Asterion demonstrates that in submitting to the bull, the feminine side of society is ultimately not passive, but active, and the ineluctable working of natural forces drags the rest of society along. The consequences of acceptance cannot be denied. The incarnation of the reconciliation between humanity and nature is something other

than human, as is to be expected, and demands unavoidable sacrifices. To the greenhouse believer the sacrifice of human life to the Minotaur of emission reduction is necessary, and joyfully accepted, as were the sacrifices of youths and maidens through the ‘bull jumping’ rituals of ancient Crete. Until such time as all of society can share the realisation of the believer, however, it is necessary that the Minotaur be concealed within a figurative labyrinth of legislative complexity. The greenhouse skeptic can see only the monstrous beast crunching human bones, not the transcendent super-human entity that is Asterion.

In mapping the anthropogenic global warming narrative onto the Pasiphaë narrative, we clearly see the roles of Pasiphaë herself, King Minos, Daedalus, and Asterion within both the ‘believer’ and ‘skeptic’ interpretations of the myth. The Janus-faced nature of both the original Pasiphaë myth and its modern realisation sheds new light on both manifestations of the narrative. An eloquent description of a mystical reconciliation between humanity or nature, or a crass tale of grotesque bestiality? We have not proposed to answer this question, only to show the two complementary lenses through which the narrative can be viewed.



The ‘scientific consensus’ of Daedalus enables the reharmonisation of humanity, returned to its proper passive state, with the virile forces of nature. (‘Pasiphae’, Andre Pijet)

1: Joseph Campbell, ‘Transformations of Myth through Time’, Harper and Row, New York, 1990.

2: Michael Grant, ‘Myths of the Greeks and Romans’, Orion Books Limited, London, 1994.

3: Pasiphaë, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasipha%C3%AB>