





Les Films Pelléas

present

METAMORPHOSES

"My intention is to tell of bodies changed to different forms."

Ovid

a film by

CHRISTOPHE HONORÉ

France / 102 minutes / Color / 2.39 / HD / 5.1 / 2014



SYNOPSIS

When Europe skips class to climb aboard an eight-wheel truck with a magnetic young man named Jupiter, little does she know of the journey of initiation that lies ahead of her. Just off the side of the motorway lies a land inhabited by powerful gods who can transform humans into plants or animals in the blink of an eye. Jupiter, Bacchus, Orpheus: Europe watches, listens and plays in this confrontation of gods and mortals, grasping a greater sense of life and love with these sweet vengeful seducers.

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHE HONORÉ

METAMORPHOSES appears to have very little in common with *Les Biens-aimés*, your last film...

I've often felt the desire to construct a new film in opposition to the previous film, or films. After having worked on novelesque films with well-known actors, after knowingly citing the great models, I felt like entering completely unfamiliar waters, which is rather new for me. I needed to escape from romantic fantasy, from tales about characters that follow their respective biographical and psychological evolutions. I think I wanted to shed the need for characters, in the traditional sense of the term.

Did you need a change of scenery?

It's actually more a question of finding another form, one that can question my own work... To try and follow a form that creates a new way of composing a story and displaying the body. Some time ago, I was reading Russell Banks's last novel, *Lost Memory of Skin*. In it, he features a quote from Ovid: "My intention is to tell of bodies changed to different forms." I took this sentence as a plan of action and returned to its source by rereading *The Metamorphoses*. This sentence resonated in me: in it I saw the very definition of cinema, or at least of a possible cinema, and a direct imperative to perform the experiment. It is a question I often ask myself: what is it about film that attracts me, if not metamorphosing reality into something new? This was a challenge that interested me, that could allow me to escape the illusion of realism. Since realism was not a concern for the film, it allowed me to take a look at the Greek myths as told by a Roman.

How exactly did you work?

The Metamorphoses is gigantic. There are several hundred fables, and I obviously couldn't keep everything. My first concern was to choose the episodes allowing me to compose a single tale, to select what could be a part of what I wanted to say. I took around twenty stories for my storyline. Within each story, I remained faithful to Ovid. What required more work was linking them together, embedding them: I wanted to go from one story to another by choosing the right people.

Is there a narrative thread running through your film?

I concentrated on the confrontation between the gods and mortals over three stages. First, the encounter with Jupiter, who attracts Europa, and tells his own story: it's the self-portrait of Jupiter as seducer, as Pygmalion, as initiator. Then comes Bacchus, and everything at that point is about belief: one must believe the tale of the gods because they can avenge the disbelief of certain men or certain women. Finally, Orpheus arrives, and I follow him in his proselytizing, his teaching, his predictions. A cult forms around him until his death – obviously violent – at the hands of the Maenads. To tie these three moments together, I looked for a single point of view that would unite them all along a common thread. This is how I imagined Europa: a very young woman initiated by three different characters. She watches them, follows them, and relates her experience, her encounters with the gods, with the myths... The idea was to give this character back her original innocence, her first morning.

Was there a particular guiding principle when preparing the film?

It was important for me to not shoot *Metamorphoses* as a cultural object, or a book of old images divorced from our present reality. I was not looking to make a clever re-enactment. I wanted to confront these tales with France, as I might film this country today. I began to cast for the film, but in an unorthodox way: few of the people appearing in the film are true, professional actors. I wanted to work with people who had no experience of being filmed, that were either very young, or foreign men and women. I didn't imagine – or, rather, I imagined all too well – Louis Garrel as Jupiter... So I took a perilous leap founded on the spectators' suspension of disbelief. Because the "actors" they see on-screen... they're seeing them for the first time and have to believe in them. Those who have no prior experience of acting are often stranger than actors, they're not concerned with a style of acting based on conventions founded on a contract of appreciation with spectators. They let themselves be looked at in their solitude, their own truth, all of which escapes verisimilitude. I needed that strangeness. It corresponded to the strangeness of the Greek gods suddenly appearing in contemporary France.

What is contemporary about Greek mythology for us today, in France?

This film is also a way of paying back the Greek debt! They have given us so much. Greece isn't in debt, it is our contemporary world that owes Greece and its gods. I had this idea in mind, which inverts the pressures of the current economic system, in the name of history and the myths. I therefore wanted to talk about Greek heritage in contemporary France: we come from Greece far more



than we do from America. We can (we must!) assert this as a rebirth of paganism! My wager consisted in saying, and showing, that these myths are the – sometimes unconscious – foundations of our current society, a sort of palimpsest, or subtext today that people, if they just scratch the surface a little, can retrieve quite easily. It is a culture that does not want to die, that refuses to be erased, and that I put out there for young French people to rediscover. I wanted something indecisive, a mix of historical periods and people.

Which is the reason why you chose the suburbs as the place where gods and men coexist...

The word that came to me during location scouting, and then during the shoot, was “peri-urban.” I wanted to find traces of nature in the city, traces that have resisted aggressive urbanization. Or a conserved stretch of nature, but right next to the city: on the side of highway exits and access roads, malls, wastelands... This is where I could define a fictional territory that has been rarely filmed, or rarely visited. This is where I could tell my viewer, “You’ve never seen Greek gods because you’ve never come here...”

One gets the impression there is a strong contrast between characters...

I would say it’s a “very populated” film, with different body types ranging from a baby to and old couple. People in the

film are fat, tiny, beautiful and ugly. I had to find a simpler way of seeing them. I wasn't expecting them to act in a "natural" style, but something that was as close as possible to them. No one speaks comfortably in the film. Jupiter, for instance, is a strange and attractive man from a foreign place, but still very close, speaking in an unusual way, with a lot of style but never looking anyone in the eyes. He refuses conventions. This way of avoiding clichés fascinates Europa who, in her case, cannot be pinned down to conventional representation, which often makes her out to be a young beautiful, rather Nordic blonde... In the film, like in the myth, she is truly torn between the East and the West.

One of the risks the film takes is with the representation of nudity...

With Ovid, nudity poses no problem. It is wholly generous and beautiful. Obviously, in a current-day suburban city, with its housing projects, this is more problematic for a young woman. But, I was surprised: a lot of the young people I selected were very comfortable with it, undoubtedly because the film and the shoot protected them. I never met with any resistance. Everyone liked being nude in nature and being filmed that way. Even next to a highway. The film in no way aims at promoting a "return to nature," but wishes to display the body in a hedonistic way. Nudity is not a return but a prerequisite, the primary condition for men and women. Initiation is founded upon the possession of a body – one's own or someone else's. Knowledge of the gods, of myths, of history, of origins, is also founded upon the carnal encounter. The scenes featuring nudity, sensuality, or sexuality, all talk about this: it is a means of accessing knowledge, both of the Other, and of the world. It is a powerful experience: the corporeal confrontation with the gods renders mortals unfit to return to the life they led beforehand.

What were the choices made when staging the nude scenes?

Natural and tender. I wanted something simple, direct, and above all to not film a performance, or make a challenge out of it, but to imagine these scenes as privileged moments, where meaning is revealed naturally, evidently. It's a type of nudity that is non-provocative, and I hope sensual and enticing.

And, for the scenes of metamorphosis?

I also wanted to flee the idea of performance. These metamorphoses are not visual transformations, using excessive make-up or CGI. This isn't a conservative position, but an aesthetic, an ethical choice: not making one see, but making one believe. This film in no

way belongs to the fantasy genre. It is more of a manifesto for the most simple belief in the "magical" power of cinema – precisely, its power to metamorphose. In this respect, editing is the most appropriate tool because it is the most effective: bringing together and splicing two consecutive shots of a man and a stage, Io and a heifer, three young women and three bats, two old people and two knotted tree trunks... One must make an effort to believe in order for this to work. Otherwise, everything falls apart. My film is ultimately constructed by the spectator, through fear but also through magic. Furthermore, there is a great diversity of metamorphoses in Ovid, a variety of tones, of pitch, and my own cinematic tools of montage, collage, off-screen space, the relationship to sound, all allow me to vary the effects. It was a lot of fun, including the CGI effects we used for certain scenes, in our own unique way.

How did the shoot unfold?

On set it could be very complicated, especially for the amateurs. They were often nude, outdoors in a natural setting, in situations that were very far from anything they were used to dealing with. But everyone was very enthusiastic, joyful, and patient. Everybody believed in it. I knew I had to remain stubbornly and assertively faithful to my vision. I had a credo, taken from St. Paul, "One must understand the invisible with the visible..." And, it was especially important for me to not shy away from the true incongruities in the film... It is also what interested and amused me: venturing out onto unstable and unknown terrain, doing something that, in theory, I didn't know how to do...

Seeing beauty in the confrontation between myths and men, in the relationship between nude bodies and nature, you had any number of possible references, namely Pasolini...

Obviously, Pasolini and his "Trilogy of Life". Thanks to him, it is still possible to think we can escape the fatality of a prosaic cinema in order to reach a more poetic cinema. That is his legacy. But I must say, I more consciously thought of Godard, the Godard of Carmen, and Hail Mary. Of bringing an ancient, mythical beauty into the present, bringing contemporary beauty closer to the ancient myths. These are the shots that kept me afloat during shooting. Or, better yet, Youssef Chahine and how incredibly happy he is to believe... his pleasure in getting people believe through cinema. I felt right at home with the idea of taking a simple palm tree and giving people Hollywood, to accept both the experience of beauty and of popular myth.

Interviewed by Antoine de Baecque

THE JOURNEY OF THE METAMORPHOSES

The Metamorphoses is one of the greatest poems Latin Antiquity has handed down to us. It is also the longest: 11 995 verses, spread over fifteen volumes. Ovid began writing it in the year 3, CE. He was 46 years old. Five years later, for reasons unknown, he was exiled by order of Emperor Augustus to Tomi, from which he was never to return. Out of desperation, he burned his manuscript, but copies of his masterpiece were already in circulation. His success was immediate, and has never slackened since. *The Metamorphoses* are one of the sources of inspiration for much of medieval literature. Shakespeare, no less, studied them closely and very often found inspiration (especially for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). *The Metamorphoses* is both a collection of tales and an encyclopaedia. The magnitude of its agenda, which justifies the size of the work, can be summed up in four verses, the first four: "My intention is to tell of bodies changed / To different forms; the gods, who made these changes, / Will help me – or so I hope so – with a poem / That runs from the world's beginnings to our own days." Ovid's ambition therefore comes back to composing a sort of universal history that he more or less divides into three great sections. The first takes us from the chaos of the origins up until Perseus, founder of Mycenae; the second, focussing on the Argonauts and Hercules, ends at the dawn of the Trojan War; and the last one, from the heroic age sung about by Homer, to the Rome of



Augustus, who is himself promised this ultimate and sublime metamorphosis of divinization. In the over ten thousand verses he wrote, Ovid tells nearly 250 fables of metamorphoses. Some are relatively famous and have inspired many poets, painters, or sculptors: Actaeon devoured by his own pack of dogs (admirable painting by Titian at the Tate Gallery in London – the stag head hunter seems to dissolve into the vague half-light of the forest, while Diana, stone-faced in the foreground, draws her bow); Narcissus in love with his reflection, who eventually gives birth to a flower (in the Louvre, Poussin offers an unforgettably subtle interpretation: in the background, Echo the nymph is almost nothing more than a shadow on a rock); Daphne becoming a laurel tree to escape Apollo's embrace (extraordinary sculpture by Bernini at the Villa Borghese, in Rome: the nymph's spread-out fingers extending into marble leaves so thin they are translucent). Other episodes are only known by specialists.

Adapting *The Metamorphoses* cannot be done by arbitrarily choosing this or that pleasant tale. One must determine a point of view, establish a gaze through which (and, more deeply, from which) the poetic thread can unfurl without breaking. The film must impose its laws, exactly like the poet imposes a voice through which all is said and all depends.

These laws, this gaze, are first of all those of a contemporary witness: the young Europa, both our guide in these *Metamorphoses* and their main heroine.

Daniel Loayza, Artistic Advisor at Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe Paris, 9 April 2014 (extracts)



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THE CHARACTERS OF OVID'S METAMORPHOSES BY ORDER OF APPEARANCE IN THE FILM

ACTAEON Grandson of Cadmus (and therefore grand-nephew of Europa), and great hunter. While straying deep into an unknown valley with his pack of dogs, he accidentally stumbles upon Diana near a cave bathing with her nymphs. Angry that she has been seen in the nude, the goddess draws a little water and throws it on his face, transforming him into a stag. Actaeon dies after being devoured by his own dogs.

DIANA Daughter of Jupiter, sister of Apollo, whom the Greeks called Artemis, is a huntress and savage deity, sometimes (under different names) associated with lunar or infernal sects.

EUROPA Phoenician, the daughter of King Agenor and sister of Cadmus. Jupiter falls in love with her and appears to her in the form of a white bull one day while walking along the shore of Sidon. The god takes her on his back and swims all the way to Crete, where he returns to his normal form before making love to her. Europa gave him many sons, including Minos, who was king of the island before presiding over the tribunal at the gates of hell.

JUPITER (Lat. Iuppiter). The supreme god of the Romans, corresponding to Zeus in ancient Greece. When he is not governing over the universe from high up in the sky (or on Mount Olympus) alongside Juno, he takes on different forms to visit the world of mortals and give free reign to his countless passionate love affairs.

JUNO (Lat. Iuno). Sister and wife of Jupiter (like Hera is to Zeus), who is so stormy and jealous of her husband that she only gives him one son, who is moreover lame: Vulcan (Hephaestus for the Greeks). With stubborn bitterness, she hunts down the humans she believes to have offended her. Io and Tiresias are among her many victims.

IO A long and sad story. In vain, this daughter of the river god Inachus tries to flee Jupiter, who wants her in spite of her resistance. To make matters worse, Juno finds out. Caught by his wife, Jupiter transforms the beautiful girl into a heifer. But Juno demands that he offer her the

superb animal as a gift. The guilty husband is in no position to refuse...

MERCURY (Lat. Mercurius). Son of Jupiter and Maia, he is one of the most evasive and mysterious gods of the Pantheon. This cunning god of exchange, of transport, travel, and passage, whom the Greeks named Hermes is dear to merchants and thieves, to interpreters and translators, to guides, and all the different creatures haunting crossroads. His power has affinities with the night and silence. He knows how to make himself unrecognizable whenever it suits him. His father turns to him for the protection of Io from the fearsome Argus...

ARGUS The son of Arestor had, according to Ovid, “a hundred eyes round his head, that took their rest two at a time in succession while the others kept watch and stayed on guard.” He is chosen by Juno to be the herdsman to watch over Io the heifer. In order to lure him into a deep sleep, Mercury gains his trust, plays a Pan flute for him (also called a syrinx) and eventually tells him how this instrument was invented...

PAN A horned and rustic god with goat hooves. He tries in vain to win the heart of the nymph Syrinx, who transforms into a reed the instant he finally thinks he has caught her. To console himself, Pan plucks a few reed stems and creates the first syrinx...

SYRINX For Ovid, the beauty of this Arcadian mountain nymph is comparable to Diana herself, and she had already often escaped from the “satyrs and harassing gods of the forests and fields” when Pan wanted to make her his lover.

BAUCIS: see Philemon (they are inseparable).

PHILEMON and **BAUCIS** One of the most famous and touching episodes of *The Metamorphoses*. Despite their poverty, this old couple were the only people to welcome Jupiter and Mercury into their humble home, somewhere in the Phrygian mountains. Philemon and Baucis even went so far as to try and sacrifice their only goose in honour of their guests. To reward them, the gods first offer them a miraculous feast, then protect them from a flood that drowns the rest of the land before promising to make their deepest wish a reality. Philemon then says, “since we have lived out harmonious years together, let the same hour take the two of us, so that I never have to see my wife’s grave, nor she have to bury me.” Their wish is granted, and they become an oak tree and a linden tree.

TIRESIAS Skilled soothsayer whose predictions always come true, Tiresias is a unique figure. He is what the Greeks called a makrobios, in other words, a being whose life stretches over several generations of ordinary mortals. He is also the only one to have lived consecutively in

the body of a man and a woman and to have known the pleasures of both sexes. This is why Jupiter chooses him to answer the very serious question: between a man and a woman, who enjoys sex the most? His verdict is not to Juno's liking, and she deprives Tiresias of his eyesight. To compensate for this punishment, which is impossible to reverse (since no god can undo what another god has done) Jupiter gives him the gift of clairvoyance.

NARCISSUS Ovid tells this story after relating the tale of Tiresias. His mother, Liriope, consults the soothsayer about the future of her newborn. Tiresias answers that her son will reach old age, only "if he does not discover himself." At age sixteen, the proud Narcissus attracts everyone he meets, while never seeming affected himself. One of the first victims of his disdain is the nymph Echo, who withers away until she is nothing more than a voice. But she is far from being the only one who is rejected by Narcissus. Incapable of tearing away from contemplating his beauty, Narcissus eventually succumbs. But, when the moment comes to burn his body on a pyre, his friends instead find a "flower with white petals surrounding a yellow heart," which now bears his name.

THE MAENADS, or BACCHANTES (Lat. Bacchae). See Bacchus.

BACCHUS Among the fiercest of all the gods, Bacchus, aka Liber, aka Dionysus (Ovid cites ten other names) is the son of Jupiter (whom the Greeks called Zeus) and Semele. Impregnated by the god, this mortal woman one day makes her lover swear he grant her a wish: she demands to see him in all of his divine glory (this is obviously the work of the jealous Juno, who inspired this macabre idea). Bound by his oath, Jupiter had to comply, and Semele was consumed by fire on the spot. To save the child that was still inside the mother, Jupiter tore it out of her womb and sewed it into his own thigh. This is why Bacchus is sometimes dubbed "twice-born." If he is the god of wine and inebriation, it is because he presides over all transformations, that power of becoming, which strips people of their identity and allows them to change. He is therefore the god of alterity, of deaths followed by rebirths, and also the god of theatre. His arrival in Thebes, his mother's city, is announced by all sorts of miracles: at his call, the most respectable women leave to form a cortege for him, taking on the name of Bacchantes and plunging deep into the forests of Mount Cithaeron. However, Pentheus, the young lord of Thebes, stubbornly persists in seeing nothing more than an impostor in his cousin (Agave and Semele, their respective mothers, are sisters). Bacchus uses his powers to fascinate Pentheus and lure him into a fatal trap, and the poor wretch ends up being torn to shreds, bare-handed by his own mother.

THREE MINYAS SISTERS (Lat. Minyeïdes). Their fate follows the horrible death of Pentheus, since not all Thebans followed Agave to Mount Cithaeron. Alcithoë and her two sisters refused, preferring to stay home, spinning wool, and telling each other myths to pass the time.

After the legend of Pyramus and Thisbe, followed by the loves of the Sun and Leucothoë, comes the very unique story of the Naiad Salmacis' passion for Hermaphroditus in verses 276 to 388. Barely after this third tale has been told, Bacchus punishes the three abstainers: while their work metamorphoses into ivy and vines, they themselves become bats.

HERMAPHRODITUS This beautiful adolescent owes his name to his parents, Hermes and Aphrodite. Raised by Naiads in the caves of Mount Ida, he leaves them to visit Caria, and stops in a meadow near a pool of clear water. This is where Salmacis, upon seeing him, is immediately overtaken by burning desire...

SALMACIS is not a Naiad like the others. She is the only nymph not to follow Diana, and prefers the pleasures of swimming to those of hunting. She is also unique thorough her passion: Salmacis is one of Ovid's rare heroines to take the first step in love. And when Hermaphroditus, thinking he is alone, bathes nude in the nymph's domain, she swims near him, wraps her arms around him, embraces him, and is finally granted her wish by the gods that both their bodies, now inseparable, form one entity. Hermaphrodite then asks his parents for a wish, which they grant: from now on, anyone who enters Salmacis' pool will lose half of their strength.

PENTHEUS See Bacchus.

CADMUS (Lat. Pentheus). See Europa. His father Agenor orders him to find his sister or never return to his homeland. After roaming the earth, the hero abandons the idea of returning to Phoenicia and founds the city of Thebes. According to legend, he introduced the alphabet to Greece.

ORPHEUS His story tells of his tragic love for Eurydice. The very day of their wedding, the unfortunate girl dies of a snake bite. The poet with the irresistible voice follows her to the underworld to beg Pluto and Proserpina to resuscitate her. The divine couple is touched by his song and consents on one condition: Orpheus must not turn around before his beloved has returned to the realm of the living. But the poet, reaching the light, cannot help but look at her, even though Eurydice is still in the shadow of death, and he loses her a second time. Now forever inconsolable, Orpheus flees the company of women and only ever sings, according to Ovid, of "the gods that love boys." The Maenads, furious at being rejected by the poet, eventually massacre him, tossing his head in the waters of the Hebrus.

ATALANTA See Hippomenes.

HIPPOMENES It is Venus in person who, through the mouth of Orpheus, tells her dear Adonis the story of Hippomenes and Atalanta, to have him promise to never hunt lions. Atalanta learned from an oracle that she would no longer be herself on her wedding day. In order to avoid marriage, she tells her suitors that she will only marry the man that can beat her in a race, and the unhappy losers will be killed. Her charm is so great that many candidates accept to run the risk. But Atalanta is even faster than she is beautiful. Hippomenes decides to try his luck, but first makes sure he prays to Venus. The goddess of love hears him and offers three golden apples from her garden in Tamasus, on the island of Cyprus. By cleverly throwing them at the right time, Hippomenes is able to slow Atalanta down (who is not insensitive to his beauty) and wins her hand. Unfortunately for them, once they have crossed the finish line, the lovers neglect to thank Venus, and the spurned deity decides to make an example of them: one day, while walking past a temple to Cybele, Venus stirs up a rush of irrepressible desire in Hippomenes, and pushes the couple to “desecrate the sanctuary with forbidden intercourse.” Outraged, Cybele immediately transforms them into lions.

VENUS The Greek Aphrodite reigns over the forces of desire, of love, and of fertility. Her power over both men and the other gods is therefore enormous. Even she herself feels the effects: throughout the poem, Ovid reminds us that the Vulcan’s wife was also Mars’ lover, had a child with Hermes, and fell in love with a simple mortal like Adonis (among others).



CAST

EUROPA	AMIRA AKILI
JUPITER	SÉBASTIEN HIREL
JUNO	MÉLODIE RICHARD
BACCHUS	DAMIEN CHAPELLE
ORPHEUS	GEORGE BABLUANI
ACTAEON	MATTHIS LEBRUN
DIANA	SAMANTHA AVRILLAUD
IO	CORALIE ROUET
MERCURY	NADIR SÖNMEZ
ARGUS	VINCENT MASSIMINO
PAN	OLIVIER MÜLLER
SYRINX	MYRIAM GUIZANI
BAUCIS	GABRIELLE CHUITON
PHILEMON	JEAN COURTE
TIRESIAS	RACHID O.
NARCISSUS	ARTHUR JACQUIN
THE MINYADES	ANNA CAMPLAN, ELÉONOR VERGEZ, MARGOT GUITTON
HERMAPHRODITUS	JULIEN ANTONINI
SALMACIS	SMARLÈNE SALDANA
PENTHEUS	YANNICK GUYOMARD
CADMUS	JIMMY LENOIR
ATALANTA	VIMALA PONS
HIPPOMENES	ERWAN HA-KYOON LARCHER
VENUS	KETI BICOLLI

CREW

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