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# Introduction to *Celluloid Classics: New Perspectives on Classical Antiquity in Modern Cinema*

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

KIRSTEN DAY

The past thirty years have seen a growing scholarly interest in examining films with a classical focus, a movement more or less initiated by Jon Solomon's 1978 study *The Ancient World in the Cinema*. This trend gained momentum in the 1990s with the publication of Martin Winkler's *Classics and Cinema* (1991) and Maria Wyke's *Projecting the Past* (1997). Since then, a steady stream of books and articles on classics in the cinema has appeared, along with an increasing number of panels on this topic at academic conferences.<sup>2</sup> Classical themes have enjoyed a corresponding revival of popularity at the box office, touched off by the success of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* in 2000. The small screen followed suit with miniseries like John Kent Harrison's 2003 *Helen of Troy* and serial dramas such as HBO's *Rome* (2005–07). The success of *Gladiator* and its influence on subsequent big and small screen productions have energized the critical study of classical antiquity and visual media, while providing classicists with new material

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1 Thanks to David Fredrick for his comments and to Sean Chapman and the editors of *Arethusa* for their suggestions on this Introduction.

2 The annual conference of the American Philological Association has presented panels on classics and film sponsored by KINHMA from 1996–99 and 2001–07. Panels on classics and film have regularly appeared at CAMWS since 2000 (two panels on classics in media in 2007; two panels on “New Perspectives on Classics and Cinema” 2006; in 2003, a panel on the “Classical Tradition in Stage and Film”; on “*Gladiator* as Visual Text and Intertext” in 2002; “Classics in Contemporary Culture” in 2001; and “Classical Tradition in Film” in 2000); and panels on classics in popular culture have appeared at non-classics focused conferences, such as the “Classical Representations in Popular Culture” (formerly “Classical Myths in Recent Literature and Film”) panels—popular among classicists and non-classicists alike—that I myself have organized at the Southwest Texas Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association conferences since 2002.

for analysis. Today the study of the representation of classical antiquity in pop culture has grown into a vigorous sub-field of classics and is increasingly recognized as a legitimate means of exploring our past in relation to the present.

Despite the relatively secure place currently enjoyed by film and media studies within the broader field of classics, the road has been rocky and far from uncontroversial. As early as 1915, B. L. Ullman, associate editor of *Classical Weekly*, recognized the potential importance of the analysis of filmic connections to the field of classics: “There is no question that the cinematograph is to become an even more important factor than it is . . . As classical teachers, let us seize an opportunity.” While Ullman admits that there is much in filmic representations of the classics that is inaccurate, “on the whole,” he concludes, “they are worth while, and one should not hesitate to make use of them” because “the cause of the Classics will be greatly benefited, for the people as a whole will become familiar with classical life and history.”<sup>3</sup>

Even with this early endorsement, interest in film in classics was long hindered by the notion of a divide between high culture, where most classicists traditionally situate the objects of their study, and low, a label that many academics, at least in years past, would assign to filmic production because of the newness of the medium, its reproducibility, and its popular appeal. Although some scholars persist in this view,<sup>4</sup> the compulsion to build walls between ancient and modern, high and low, continues to diminish. And while contemporary film criticism does attempt to distinguish serious movies from frivolous ones, the clarity and value of such distinctions are hotly debated. At the same time, interest among classicists in ancient topics previously considered unworthy of serious study—such as Greek novels, erotic epigrams, and graffiti—has worked to erode the lines between high and low from within. As a result, classicists are gradually distancing themselves from the high/low dichotomy and coming to recognize the value

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3 1915.201–02. Martin Winkler mentions this passage in the introduction to *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*.

4 As Wyke notes at 1997.5–6, scholars like Bernard Knox have vehemently objected to current trends in classical scholarship, arguing that “multiculturalism, feminism, and political correctness” are threats to traditional approaches and canonical texts (1994.13) and positioning popular culture in general as a “cultural dilution” that devalues the “genuine article” (1994.305). For a brief but cogent overview of the controversy concerning the value of the study of classics in popular culture, see Wyke 1997.5–8.

of exploring the representation of classical antiquity in cinema regardless of artistic merit. As James Clauss's essay in this volume illustrates, even the most seemingly absurd revisions of ancient myth in film often utilize intersections between past and present that touch on concerns and anxieties common to ancient and modern audiences alike.

Another sticking point for many classicists is what we tend to see as the "corruption" of classical material in modern reworkings: despite the flexible attitudes of the Greeks and Romans, who readily accepted variant versions of myths, adapted old stories, and presented histories in the spirit of the truth rather than with complete factual accuracy, modern classicists often view the liberties taken by popular culture with ancient material with a condescending sense of horror. Those of us who tend towards this position might bear in mind that the Greeks, too, introduced a new medium—one whose appeal, like that of film, cut across the demographic spectrum—through which traditional narratives could be communicated: drama. In drama, myths were transformed, partly in response to changing social and political contexts and the expectations of the audience. For example, Aegisthos receives principal credit in Homer for the murder of Agamemnon, but, by the sixth century, blame had been transferred to Clytemnestra, a shift that Sue Blundell relates to the increasing dominance of patriarchal structures with the emergence of the polis (1995.18, 74–77). Thus Clytemnestra is depicted in fifth-century drama as the driving force behind the plot to murder her husband the better to illustrate the dangers of a woman in power for an audience increasingly defined by "the democratic body" (see Halperin 1990.95ff.). So, too, do modern filmmakers alter ancient myths in adapting them to new ideological and political contexts.

This same strategy is equally at play in films with a purportedly historical focus. In *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White argues that history itself "is a kind of art" where "the historian not only mediates between past and present, he also has the special task of joining together two modes of comprehending the world that would normally be unalterably separated" (1978.27–28). White's observation applies to makers of films that draw on historical events or characters as well, such as Cecil B. DeMille with his 1932 *Sign of the Cross*, 1934 *Cleopatra* (as well as Joseph Mankiewicz's 1963 film of the same name), Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), or, more recently, Zack Snyder's *300* (2007). Representations of ancient Rome that are anchored in historical material, for example, are often filtered through a Christian lens or presented by means of anachronistic frameworks that center on modern notions of romantic love, and thus they impart an inauthentic

view of what the ancient world was “really like.” Yet these inaccuracies, large and small, have their uses. As Sandra Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Maria Wyke argue in their introduction to *Imperial Projections*, films based on classical antiquity “should not be judged by the ways in which they successfully represent a ‘real’ text or past events; rather, they should be seen as complex and rich dialogues with the past whose value resides precisely in how the past is reformulated in the light of the present” (2001.2). That is, the “inaccuracy” detected by one scholar is another’s opportunity for ideological critique. By calling attention to how contemporary films change, adapt, or distort classical material, scholars can help audiences become better informed about antiquity; at the same time, analyzing the ideological impulses that drive the “misrepresentation” of antiquity in film helps us reach a better understanding both of our own society and of how ancient men and women had to deal with their own ideological context.

In addition, whether we like it or not, representations of classical antiquity on television and in film are often the primary means through which the general public engages with the ancient world and the main vehicle through which non-classicists learn what they think they know about the Greeks and Romans. As Allan Massie points out: “That lions devoured Christians in the Colosseum is a fact firmly lodged in people’s minds, even though a recent history of the Colosseum questions whether such scenes ever took place there.” As experts and scholars, therefore, it is both in our own interest and in that of our field to address how these modern representations relate to ancient material. And while these cinematic depictions may tell us more about the present than they do about antiquity, their engagement with the past is not unimportant; indeed, these productions tell us much about how and why modern audiences connect with the ancient world. As Joshel, Malamud, and Wyke note: “By displacing contemporary concerns into a recognizable and familiar past . . . popular representations allow audiences simultaneously to distance themselves from that past and to identify with it” (2001.4). Through an understanding of *why* the past continues to inform twenty-first-century popular culture, we as teachers can make the ancient world more immediate and relevant to today’s student. Conversely, the critique of popular representations of antiquity compels us as classicists to engage more with contemporary historical, political, and social concerns and to explore the ways in which the classical past continues to be culturally significant. As Maria Wyke says in her introduction to *Projecting the Past*: “Historians should try to understand not whether a particular cinematic account of history is true or disinterested, but what the logic of

that account may be, asking why it emphasizes this question, that event, rather than others” (1997.13). While Wyke is concerned with films based on historical material, a similar principle applies to films centered on Greco-Roman mythology and literature. Cinema provides us a door through which we can explore the past, and it simultaneously offers antiquity a welcome entry into the present day. In negotiating this threshold, each component is altered and transformed by its significant engagement with the other, as is true of any interchange of consequence. Often, it is the points of transformation that teach us the most. By exploring these intersections critically, we can capitalize on modern productions to discover more about both our classical past and our popular present.

If we as teachers and scholars can use cinema as a tool to reinvigorate interest in a field that is admittedly not at its apex, we should embrace this opportunity. Despite the overall decline of interest in classics in colleges and universities in recent decades, offerings on classics in cinema can rejuvenate stagnating programs and boost sagging numbers by offering a foot in the door: students reluctant to sign up for intimidating Latin and Greek language classes or courses in translation on obscure authors or dusty topics in ancient history are eager to enroll in courses on “Ancient Epics in Cinema” or “Roman History through Film,” and often have their interest piqued enough to dig into their own Greco-Roman roots a little more deeply.<sup>5</sup> In *The Future of the Classic*, Salvatore Settis argues that “the spread of superficial and persistent ‘classical’ references (particularly apparent in advertising and cinema) is not preventing the expulsion of classical culture from our shared cultural horizon. Quite the opposite, it is accentuating and accelerating it. Indeed, it is legitimizing the phenomenon, because it tends to conceal it” (2006.13). However, I would argue that by engaging with these visual texts meaningfully and thoughtfully in academic settings, “superficial” references in cinema and other media—references that, in fact, always have their own ideological and political meaning—can aid us as teachers in halting and even reversing this “expulsion” of the classics from education and our culture more generally.

As such, classics in popular culture is a topic that has particular importance at this moment in history. The flurry of recent publications attests

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5 Both Gore Vidal (1992.18) and Jon Solomon (2001.xv) indicate that watching classically based movies as young boys prompted their interest in antiquity.

to scholarly interest in furthering this subject, and the popularity among students of classics in film courses suggests it has its place in education. The ongoing analysis of classical antiquity in popular culture has widened the pool of films considered relevant for this type of examination and suggested connections between cinematic representations and other media, such as architecture, historical novels, and fashion. It has also broadened the methodological scope of the tools scholars utilize in these investigations. Initial consideration of classics in cinema focused on explicit representations of Greek and Roman history and mythology, from the low-budget Italian sword-and-sandal movies of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as *Hercules* and its sequels, to big-budget historical fiction or fantasy films such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Ben Hur* (1959), and *Clash of the Titans* (1981). Gradually, scholars expanded their focus to include films with less overt connections to the ancient world, where the filmmaker either purposefully inserts subtle classical tropes or subconsciously taps into anxieties that manifest themselves in archetypal patterns. As the field of classical antiquity in popular culture has gained a foothold, the scope of these inquiries and the approaches scholars take to them have become more varied and sophisticated, incorporating film and gender theory, psychoanalytical analysis, and feminist approaches, in addition to the more straightforward literary-historical analysis used in earlier studies.<sup>6</sup>

With an ever increasing number of books and articles on the subject, however, it behooves us to ask: what is the value of one more volume on classical antiquity in cinema? How do on-going investigations of this subject contribute to our understanding of our classical past and its continuing influence on our present? As John Solomon notes, films with classical connections can be appreciated on two levels: either as casual entertainment or as intelligent engagement with ancient history and mythology (2001.xvii). By attending to the latter, we can help more students come to see the value of the ancient world and its relevance to their worlds today. In order to effectively make the most of this opportunity, however, a sustained scholarly exchange of ideas on this topic is necessary.

As such, this volume stands as one in a series of works that seek to develop a foundational set of resources from which teachers and schol-

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6 Not only are classical scholars becoming increasingly sophisticated in the way they approach this area of study, as Martin Winkler notes (2001.19–20), the medium of film is becoming increasingly “literary” in the way it is packaged and marketed to the discriminating viewer.

ars can draw in further explorations in this relatively young sub-field. One way this volume distinguishes itself from most earlier collections of essays on classics in cinema, however, is in its scope: we have worked to provide a balance between historical, mythological, and literary subjects, between Greek and Roman themes, and across genre divisions. Until recently, the primary focus of scholarly attention in the area of classics in the cinema has been directed towards Rome: apart from Gideon Nisbet's recent *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (2006), most volumes have a decidedly Roman focus: Joshel, Malamud and McGuire 2001, Wyke 1997, Winkler 2004, Cyrino 2005, and Winkler 2007.<sup>7</sup> This inclination towards Rome stems, in part, from the fact that the Roman amphitheater functions as an ancient counterpart to American cinema—the games and spectacles presented in the amphitheater work as a metaphor for watching movies in the theater—while Greece doesn't offer quite this kind of parallel. Film theory, which includes consideration of mass spectatorship, therefore seems to have a more natural application to Rome.

At the same time, the inclination towards Roman history in particular stems from the convenient analogy between the civic ideals of a young America with those of the Roman republic and the equally useful parallel between the atrocities and excesses of the Roman Empire and the view that our American culture is growing increasingly corrupt.<sup>8</sup> As such, Roman history provides an effective vehicle for looking at contemporary political issues through the safety of a "filter." Yet because of its underlying function of explaining natural phenomena and exploring anxieties common in the human experience, classical mythology, too, provides a safe forum for examining issues of importance to a modern audience, although connections with classical myths often manifest themselves less overtly than Roman themes in modern cinema. While critical investigations of classical mythology in film will therefore generally focus more on the psychological, politics and psychology are not mutually exclusive. Consequently, several of the essays in this collection that analyze Greek myth are deeply concerned with the relationship of these films to contemporary political and social movements.

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7 Martin Winkler's 1991 *Classics and Cinema*, and its revised 2001 version under the title *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, are notable exceptions to the usual Rome-centered focus.

8 For more on this analogy, see Wyke 1997.2ff., Joshel, Malamud, and McGuire 2001.2ff., and Malamud in this volume.

Our collection as a whole draws on approaches from across this spectrum, identifying mythological elements in films that are not explicitly classical in plot or setting (Day and Bakewell), discussing the recurrence of mythological tropes in modern cinema (Clauss, Winkler, and O'Sullivan), analyzing the application of ancient history to our own society (Malamud), and examining how both mythology (Joseph and Johnson) and history (Albu and Fredrick) are rewritten for modern audiences. Despite this variety and the fact that the papers in this collection were conceived and written independently, as the collection came together, we saw important theoretical intersections, such as consideration of the monomyth of Joseph Campbell, of fetishization and the relationship between vision and power, and of related psychoanalytic theories of the gaze<sup>9</sup> to name a few. These points of convergence hint at the broader significance of filmmakers' appropriation of classical antiquity and the persistence of ancient mythological themes in modern film. As a result, these essays, though in many ways diverse, exhibit a surprising interconnectedness that we hope the reader will find useful. What all the essays have in common more broadly is an appreciation for classical themes in contemporary popular media, a critical awareness of what we have to learn from the intersection between ancient and modern, and an understanding of how the field of classics is enhanced by a close examination of the appearance of Greco-Roman themes in modern film. While many earlier works have been primarily concerned with the crucial role cinema has played in constructing antiquity in our modern historical consciousness (i.e., Wyke 1997), this collection devotes equal attention to the ways that classical history, legends, and mythologies work to reshape the way we perceive the present.

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<sup>9</sup> As a visual medium capable of exploiting special effects and editing to vary and emphasize perspective, film is, of course, a medium uniquely suited for exploring the issues of vision, gender, and power that have preoccupied mankind since ancient times.

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