Studia Antiqua et Archaeologica 21(2): 243–253

"Classicism for all": another way of disseminating antiquity — the artistic movie

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Abstract. *For centuries, the role of the humanistic studies and of the classical heritage has been regarded as central and irreplaceable. Over the past decades, however, changes have occurred in various sectors, including science and education, which is why classics are facing many difficulties. This paper aims to present a new initiative which attempts to overcome the classical education crisis and capture the interest for classical Antiquity, opportunity offered by cinematic depictions.*

Rezumat. *Timp de secole, rolul studiilor umaniste și al patrimoniului clasic a fost considerat fundamental și de neînlocuit. În ultimele decenii însă au avut loc modificări în diferite sectoare, inclusiv știință și educație, motiv pentru care clasicii se confruntă cu numeroase dificultăți. Lucrarea de față își propune să prezinte o inițiativă nouă prin care se încearcă depășirea crizei educației clasice și captarea interesului pentru Antichitatea clasică, oportunitate oferită de reprezentările cinematografice.*

Keywords: classical world, popular culture, cinematography, receiving Antiquity, film.

Motion pictures are so much a part of our lives that it's hard to imagine a world without them. For more than 100 years, people have been trying to understand why this medium has so captivated us. Movies communicate information and ideas, and they show us places and ways of life we might not otherwise know. They offer us new ways of seeing and feeling, engaging our minds and emotions[2], despite the beliefs of Louis Lumière, that the cinema is an invention without a future[3].

Film is a young medium, at least compared to most other media. Painting, literature, dance, and theatre have existed for thousands of years, but film came into existence only a little more than a century ago. There is a widespread assumption that the longer something has been studied, the less there is to discover or say about it. This vision is understandable, but misconceived. New knowledge becomes available to us all the time, new texts, artefacts, buildings, and sometimes entire ancient cities are brought to light by increasingly sophisticated archaeological techniques; and, most importantly of all, our own modern

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[2] BORDWELL, THOMPSON 1979, 2.

[3] MONACO 2000, 38.

concerns shed light on areas forgotten or differently understood by previous generations, such as sexuality, ethnicity and religion[4].

The purpose of this paper is to show a new way of perceiving Antiquity, namely the artistic movie. By their very success, these films managed to arise several questions: can films set in antiquity help classicists in their teaching? Can they expand the knowledge of the ancient world? Can they help resolve the opposition between scholarly research and popular culture? Most importantly, can films about the past elucidate our own society's present desires, concerns, and fears?[5]

Today more than ever, popular images and stories projected onto movie, television, and computer screens invite us to experience, understand, and connect to the ancient world. Films about antiquity bridge the gap between that past and the present by offering spectacular and compelling interpretations of history, literature, and mythology that are relevant and educational for contemporary viewers[6].

Cinematography represents a new form of receiving antiquity, significantly better than theatre in creating "the experience of spectatorship"[7] and in responding to the demands of a "post-literary world", captivated by digital technology and by electronic means[8]. It is the art that possess the greatest capacity to transmit, to simultaneously explore what areas such as music, painting or sculpture can provide. This is accomplished independently from their models, from what is mandatory and what is allowed. Proof of its visual power is the tendency to create mirror images, topos or archetypes[9] in the collective consciousness[10], which involves some risks in the terms of cultural channel used. It creates profound characters with a deep substrate. They are marked by features that dominate them entirely, and which may be final with a simple adjective: villains, heroes, liars, comrades, traitors etc.

Awareness of the importance of popular culture, both ancient and modern, for all of culture, society, and the arts help us bridge the gap between antiquity and today. Moreover, approaching common cultural history in this way, we may throw new light on both the past and the present. It can illumine the present by revealing the influence of the past even where it may not have been suspected to exist, just as we may illumine the past by examining it from our modern vantage point. Martin M. Winkler, professor at George Mason University in Washington consider that in order to do this sensibly and successfully, both sides must be approached fairly and equally[11].

[4] LOWE, SHAHABUDIN 2009, 7.

[5] CYRINO 2005, 2.

[6] CYRINO 2005,1.

[7] POTTER 2012.

[8] JUNKELMANN 2004.

[9] MARCHENA, 29/ 2, 2007, 173–187.

[10] IGOR 2006, 1, 99–102.

[11] WINKLER 2001, 4.

Classical studies represent a versatile academic discipline, capable of combining methods established long ago with modern epistemological approaches to ancient cultures and their traditions. Recently, this direction has benefited from an increased interest. In colleges and universities, mythology, classic civilization or literature courses include film projections more and more often. In a period when humanities in general and classical antiquity in particular no longer represent the foundation of Western education, the use of films within a traditional and mainly non-visual curriculum can provide an excellent means of keeping Greece and Rome in the centre of interest[12]. Hence, among such courses and seminars, we mention the course initiated in 2005 at the University of Heidelberg and materialized in the volume *Hellas on Screen: Cinematic Receptions of Ancient History, Literature and Myth* emerged in 2008 at Stuttgart; the seminar *Cinema and the Ancient World* held for several years at the Department of Classics within The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the course *Big Screen Rome* held in 2000 at The New Mexico University by Monica Cyrino and concretized in 2005 in the volume with the same title, or most recent courses such as the one from Western Ontario University, Canada, entitled *Ancient Greece in Film,* or *Cine y Mundo Antiguo* from Universidad de Granada, the course held by Prof. Krešimir Matijević of the University of Trier, *Alte Geschichte im Film*, etc.

The films that reconstitute the Antiquity period can be extremely useful in demonstrating the difference between how life really was in those times and how it could have been or we wish it had been. Of course, we are the ones required to have the ability of pinpointing and neutralizing the stereotypes and anachronisms present on the small screen, in order to take advantage of this opportunity. In this sense, we find representative the words of Anthony Man, the director of two extremely well done and historically accurate films (*El Cid*, 1961; *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1964): *if everything is historical, then you don't have liberty... inaccuracies from a historical point of view... are not important*[13]. He considered that film could create an emotional closeness to historical reality, a certain affinity, the so-called "feeling of history", but also another manner of receiving history.

The past thirty years have seen a growing scholarly interest in examining films with a classical focus, movement initiated by Jon Solomon's 1978 study *The Ancient World in Cinema,* followed by that of Marianne McDonald, *Euripides in Cinema: The Heart Made Visible* (1983) and that of Kenneth McKinnon, *Greek Tragedy into Film* (Rutherford, 1986). 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[14], along with an increasing number of panels on this

[12] WINKLER 2001, 5.

[13] ROSENSTONE 1995.

[14] Encyclopaedias – see DiMARE 2011, authored books (see, for example, PAUL 2013), collections of studies (see, for example, RAW, TUTAN 2013; KNIPPSCHILD, MORCILLO 2013). We note, also in this context, several magazines

topic at academic conferences[15]. Also, were conducted thematic issues of journals[16], as well as numerous private contributions[17] and electronic journals: *Roda da Fortuna – Electronic Journal about Antiquity and Middle Ages.*

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. On the small screen followed a series of films like *Quo Vadis* (Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 2001), *Asterix and Obelix Meet Cleopatra* (Alain Chabat, 2002), *Helen of Troy* (John Kent Harison, 2003), *Imperium: Augustus* (Roger Young, 2003). The success of *Gladiator* and his influence on big and small screen productions have energized the critical study of classical antiquity and visual media, while providing classicists with new material for analysis. However, only starting with 2004 can be found movies with famous titles, dealing a variety of themes, with a great budget and who enjoyed a tremendous audience: *Troy* (Wolfgang Peterson, 2004), *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), *King Arthur* (Antoine Fuqua, 2004), *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2005), *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006), serial dramas such as HBO's *Rome* (2005–07), *Spartacus: War of the Damned* (Steven S. DeKnight, 2010–2013) etc.

These movie titles include items that redefined antique world in the new century cinema, strengthening it and leading it towards new ways[18]:

– New IT technologies used in order to recreate large parts of the ancient world (places, battles), which act as incentives in the context of the recurrence of a certain fascination for the ancient world: *The Gladiator*, *Troy*, *Alexander the Great*, *Agora*;

– The spectacular genre called "Blood and Sand", a new phenomenon linked mainly to Frank Miller's comics adaptation, in 2006, in the movie *300*, specifically his vision on the Battle

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dedicated to ancient culture receptions, among which those initiated by Lorna Hardwick from The Open University, Milton Keynes, where is professor and director of the project *Classical Receptions in Late Twentieth-Century Drama and Poetry in English: New Voices in Classical Reception Studies*, whose first issue appeared in 2006, *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies,* whose debut took place in November 2007**,** and *Classical Receptions Journal*, initiated in May 2009, that aims to "cover all aspects of reception the texts and materials from the ancient Greek and Rome culture from antiquity until nowadays."

[15] Debates regarding classics and film have taken place regularly since 2000. For example The Classical Association of the Middle West and South held in 2000 the conference „Classical Tradition in Film", „Gladiator as Visual Text and Intertext" (2002), "Classical Tradition in Stage and Film" (2003), "New Perspectives on Classics and Cinema" (2006). Other colloquiums and conferences: Pepa Castillo, Silke Knippschild, Marta García Morcillo, Carmen Herreros (eds.), „Congreso Internacional: Imagines: La Antigüedad en las Artes Escénicas y Visuales" / "International Conference: Imagines: the reception of antiquity in performing and visual arts". Logroño 22-24 de octobre de 2007, Universidad de La Rioja, Logroño, 2008.

[16] For example, *Arethusa*, 41/1, 2008: Celluloid Classics: New Perspectives on Classical Antiquity in Modern Cinema, electronic journals, *Historias del Orbis Terrarum. Estudios Classics, Medievales, Arabes y Byzantine*. 08, Santiago, 2012, *Auctores Nostri*, Foggia, 10, 2012: Cristianesimo e Cinema.

[17] See, for example, Óscar Lapeña Marchena, *La imagen del mundo en el antiguo y en el opera y en el cine. Continuidad y Divergence* in *Veleia: Revista de prehistoria, historia antigua, arqueología y filología clásicas,* 21/2004, p. 201–215.

[18] LAZANO 2012, 43.

of Thermopylae. The warrior striking facet that overlaps other historical issues is a format that has been proliferated, especially, in recent years. As an example we have the series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010-2011) and *The Clash of the* Titans (2010), in which the antique context is a simple background or rather a mere excuse for an intense portrayal of violent or erotic events.

– The new *peplum* genre orientation towards the French American co-productions: *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion* (2010), *The Eagle* (2011) in which the view of ancient world is centred towards the Roman presence in Britain and it focuses on addressing issues who were considered until recently marginal for the *peplum* genre: language differences, acculturation, lower social classes.

This new orientation comes with a more complete vision of the ancient world which is influenced by academic studies when making a film production but, keeps in touch with "the warriors" (old characters of the *peplum* genre), and re-analyses them in the light of a different optic which deepens the complexity of different facets of the film's subject, the cultural context of the time etc.

Presently, the study of classical antiquity representations in popular culture has become a powerful sub-domain of classicism and it has been increasingly acknowledged as a legitimate means of exploring our past in relation with the present. For many classicists, the manner of corrupting classical material in order to use it in a new, modern fashion is a sensitive topic: adapting old stories, myths, presenting an imprecise history – modern classicists watch with terror these liberties taken by popular culture concerning ancient materials[19]. The renaissance of the epic genre in the contemporary era, a period marked by growing ethnic and religious conflicts is a subject of critical analysis particularly convincing, inviting to reconsideration and comprehensive review of this kind of films from a variety of perspectives.

Filmmakers modify ancient myths, by adapting them to the new ideologies and political contexts. Therefore, the antiquity-inspired film is a historical source for the contemporary period; however, it is primarily an artistic creation seeking to transmit a message— more or less explicitly—specific to the era in question. Such an example is provided by films included in the categories of *sandaloni* or *sandal-and-sword epic* and *peplum* (this term is a synonym of great spectacle). This type of film was very popular in the 50s and 60s, because it evoked "the great depression" of 1932–1935[20] and it proposed a model of character opposed to the one of American films, which praised the superhero, the American buffed, powerful, athletic playboy, such as the '60 Spartacus in the film by Stanley Kubrick or the Spartans in *The 300 Spartans* (1962; director: Rudolph Maté).[21]

[19] DAY 2008, 3.

[20] MALAMUD 2008, 157–183.

[21] NEALE 1996, 9–20. However, the phenomenon is present today in cinematography. See COMBE, BOYLE 2013, 73–120.

The *peplum* has often been criticized for focusing on the spectacle to the detriment of historical reality. In the history of Antiquity, filmmakers have found an entire series of perfect screenplays for cinema. The texts of Greek and Latin historians, the mythology and, most of all, the Bible provide—in the words of Ricardo Freda—*numerous possibilities and passion-filled scripts*[22]. Furthermore, numerous situations can be dramatized, such as wars, gladiators' fights, triumphal entries, etc. To this end, costumes, settings, landscapes, academic painting, ruins and expert advice are used; all of them provide to filmmakers the image of antiquity that they are bound to reconstitute.

Irrespective of the filmmaker's intention and of the cinematographic quality of a film, screenwriters are always influenced by the ancient authors' view of the period and by their own representations, as the latter are the product of the society to which the screenwriters pertain.

Therefore, like all so-called historical films, *peplum* reveals certain preoccupations that go way beyond the temporal interval represented on screen. In this sense, it is worth mentioning novels adapted to cinematography, such as the 1951 *Quo Vadis?*, directed by Mervyn Le Roy, after a novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz; this film shows a glimpse of the cruelty of a Roman emperor and its plot suggests the last conflict of the Americans with the European dictators, as well as the social and political preoccupations entailed by the anti-communist crusade of the USA. It is also worth mentioning the 1959 *Ben-Hur* (inspired from the novel with the same name and including the subtitle *A Story of Christ*, by Lew Wallace, directed by William Wyler). In this film, the cinematographic view of the Romans is marked by the historical context of the 50s: there is a clear reference to the conflict between the defenders of freedom and the Soviet totalitarian system; there are also hints to German occupation. Another novel included in the same context is *Spartacus* by Howard Fast, adapted to cinematography in 1960, directed by Stanley Kubrick; it evokes, among others, the fight against racial discrimination of black people[23]. There are such subtle messages in cinematographic productions of a more recent date. The first is *Alexander* (1956, directed by Robert Rossen; 2004, directed by Oliver Stone), where the Macedonian king is depicted as a liberal heroic model, disseminator of Occidental culture, but also an admirer of Oriental civilization[24]. The second is *Gladiator* (2000, directed by Ridley Scott), which suggests a leader with irreproachable conduct and republican views[25], and a successful provincial, endowed with exceptional virtues[26]; the spectacle is used as an instrument of power[27]. The third is *Troy* (2004, directed by Wolfgang Peterson) and the fourth

[22] AZIZA 1998, 56–62.

[23] WINKLER 2007, 154–188.

[24] WIEBER 2008, 21–38; POMERY 2008, 95–111.

[25] ALBU 2008, 185–204.

[26] ARENAS 2001, 1–13.

[27] *Colosseum* in the context of Rome is seen as a political metaphor for America.

is *300* (2007 dramatization by Zack Snyder) — all provide a new view of Roman and Greek heroes and of their world, a view which meets to a larger extent the expectations of contemporary public, open to creating connections between ancient examples and present realities (e.g., the war between the West and the Eastern, Muslim world[28]; the war of the West against the arbitrariness of one person, against Eastern monstrosity, obscurantism and fanaticism[29], against disguised American hegemony and the rapport between democracy and war[30]). *Agora* (2009, directed by Alejandro Amenabar) refers to the brutal and arbitrary way in which Christianity was imposed in Alexandria.

Cinematography is the one that puts you in front of historical events, almost without mediation. No other art has been able to equally record the major and minor seizures and conversions that mankind has suffered throughout the time, or for that matter the people in a century of history. *Taking any film from the past — from yesterday, the day before yesterday or from the very beginning of cinema — it will provide beyond the story, the cinematographic current, the genre and the genius of the man who signed the screenplay, the micro-history of a gesture, of a way, of a trend, as well as different ways in which those people wanted to be seen. Movies are not only fiction, although they can be seen only so; they are, in a sense somewhat absurd, living mirrors of their passage through life, preserved on celluloid*[31].

In *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White argues that history in itself "is a kind of art", where "the historian is not only an intermediary between the past and the present, he also has the special task of bringing together two ways of understanding the world, who would normally be separated"[32].

White's observations also apply to film directors who rely on events or historical figures, such as Cecil B. DeMille with his *Sign of the Cross* (1932), *Cleopatra* from 1934 (as well as Joseph Mankiewicz's version from 1963 with the same name), *Spartacus* or, more recently, *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007). The representations of ancient Rome are often presented in terms of Christianity beliefs or through outdated frameworks that focus on modern notions of romance and therefore giving an inauthentic view of what the ancient world was truly like[33].

As Sandra Joseph, Margaret Malamud and Maria Wyke argue in the introduction of *Imperial Projections*, "the films that are based on classical antiquity should not be judged by the ways in which they are successful in portraying a real text or past events; rather, they must be seen as complex and rich dialogues with the past and their value lies precisely in how the past is reformulated in light of the present"[34]. By drawing attention to the way in which

[28] See PAGDEN 2009, cap. 1. *Una inimicizia perenne*.

[29] See LEVENE 2007, 383–404; PORMANN 2009, 197–233.

[30] STRAUS 2001, 57–84.

[31] ȘERBAN 2012, 76.

[32] WHITE 1978, 27–28.

[33] DAY 2008, 4.

[34] JOSHEL, MALAMUD, MCGUYRE Jr. 2001, 2.

contemporary films change, adapt or distort traditional materials, scholars can help the public in becoming better informed about the antiquity and at the same time, the analysis of ideological impulses that lead to distortions of antiquity in the film can help in reaching a better understanding of both our society and of the way in which both men and women in antiquity had to face their own ideological context.

Besides, whether we like it or not, representations of classical antiquity on television and in movies are often the primary mean by which the public becomes acquainted with the ancient world and the main instrument through which we learn about Greek and Roman civilization.

Experts and scholars believe that is both in our interest and in that of our field to address how these modern representations relate to ancient material. Cinematic depictions may tell more about the present than they do about antiquity, their engagement with the past is very important, 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 the past and to identify with it*[35].

Through an understanding of why the past continues to inform twenty-first-century popular culture, teachers and specialists can make the ancient world more immediate and relevant to today's student. Conversely, the critique of popular representations of antiquity compels the 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.

Thus, the subject of classics in popular culture has a special significance in this time of history. The abundance of recent publications attests scientific interest in this topic, and the popularity that classics film courses enjoy among students suggests that they have their well-earned place in education. The continuous analysis of classical antiquity has extended the films considered relevant for this type of examination, and suggested connections between cinematographic representations and other fields, such as architecture, historical novels and fashion.

It also expanded the methodological tools used by scientists in these investigations. Initially, the classics' considerations focused on explicit representations of history and Greco-Roman mythology, making the transition from low-budget films such as Italian *sword and sandal* ones from the late '50s and early '60s, like *Hercules* and its sequels, to the big-budget historical fiction or fantasy films such as *Quo Vadis*, *Ben Hur* and *Clash of the Titans* (1981). Gradually, their focus has expanded also on films that have fewer connections with the ancient world. As the field of classical antiquity gained a foothold in popular culture, the field

[35] DAY 2008, 4.

of these investigations and approaches made by scientists became more varied and sophisticated, incorporating film and gender theory, psychoanalytic and feminist approaches in addition to the historical and literary analysis used in previous studies.

Until recently, the main focus in the field of film classics was directed towards Rome; apart from the recently published work of Gideon Nisbet, *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (2006) most of the volumes focus solely on Roman history: Joshel, Malamud and McGuire (2001), Maria Wyke (1997), Martin M. Winkler (2004), Monica Cyrino (2005) and Martin Winkler (2007).

This tendency towards Rome comes, in part, from the fact that the ancient Roman amphitheatre is a version of the American cinema—the games and shows presented in the amphitheatre function as a metaphor for watching movies in the theatre—while Greece does not provide such parallelism. At the same time, the inclination to Roman history in particular, comes from the analogy between the ideals of young citizens of America with those of the Roman republic and provides a useful parallel between the atrocities and excesses of the Roman Empire and the view that American culture is facing a high growth of corruption[36].

The film comes and strengthens popular ideas about the ancient world. Repeatedly Rome was chosen over Greece or Greek stories were often modified, disguised as Roman novels. At first glance, it would seem that Hollywood has a problem with Greece. Gideon Nisbet suggests in his book that Hollywood's problem is part of a set of anxieties regarding reception; it reflects an uncertainty over how the Greek ideas should be implemented[37].

The production of films that depict historical events from Greece, as stated above, is considered to be lower than the number of movies about Rome, but both share a number of characteristics. As in the case of Rome's history, we are able to see only small parts of Greece's past in cinema. The films that have as an inspiration source Greek history tend to draw from a limited series of events and stories, Alexander the Great and the Persian wars are those found in the greatest extent.

The historical reading of the film, doubled by a cinematographic reading of history, incidentally invites you to assess—often in a corrective and stimulating manner—its main protagonists. I refer here to the "great people" (Alexander, Cesar, Augustus), the less loved historical characters (Xerxes, Nero, Attila), the bearers of ideological flags (Moses, Leonidas, Spartacus, Vercingetorix, Arminius), the Sunday school view (Bible as seen by Hollywood), the sexist manners (Cleopatra, Messalina, Theodora), the victimization (Hypatia), etc.

Therefore, the representation of antiquity through cinematography offers a triple history lesson[38]. We can decipher the past—at least partially—from the following perspectives: the past told by ancient people, the past as it is known in the present and the present reflected in

[36] DAY 2008, 4.

[37] NISBET 2005, XIV.

[38] DUMONT 2013, XV.

this representation of the past. In parallel, the juxtaposition of cinematographic productions since 1895 to present highlights the history of the century through the eyes of the seventh art, through its technological evolution, through the dangers associated to its productions, through its behind-the-scenes policies and to its aesthetic nuances.

In conclusion, we can posit that artistic film plays an important role within the studies of classic antiquity reception. For this reason, specialists believe that more attention should be paid to this branch and that more debates should be organized to explore the relation between cinematography and antiquity.

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