

PROLOGUE: ANTIQUITY IN CURRENT POPULAR CULTURE

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Un classico è un libro che non ha mai finito di dire quel che ha da dire.
Perché leggere i classici, Italo Calvino.

The ancient world and the process of rereading, reinterpreting and revival to which different European societies have subjected it throughout history constitutes one of the cornerstones on which the complex construct called “Western civilisation” has been edified. This historical period and its cultural baggage – comprising a long list of examples and possible teachings – was so important that it is hardly surprising that most of European history occurring at the time has been dubbed the “classical world”. Moreover, what is involved is a cultural substratum that, as Calvino was wont to say about the classics, never seems to finish what it has to say and in which, at least for the historian, the historical period per se is just as important as the long process of interpretation and review, or rereading, to which it has been subject hitherto. This set of studies was usually referred to as “classical tradition”, but, since the 1990s, with the introduction of methodological and conceptual changes, now tends to come under the heading of “classical reception studies”.¹ It is important to note that it is one of

¹ On the shift, not without some controversy, from classical tradition to reception studies, see the recent study by Pourcq 2012, as well as Hardwick 2003, p. 2-11.

the fields of study pertaining to the classical world that is currently experiencing the greatest growth.²

The aim of this book is to reflect on a specific aspect of this reinterpretation of the classical world. Classical tradition and even classical reception studies have habitually dealt with what we could call “high culture”. Our intention here, however, is to perform new analyses focusing on the impact of antiquity on contemporary popular culture. This is an issue, as already noted above, on which historians of the classical world did not tend to dwell. Moreover, it was even considered an unbecoming activity for scholars and of scant scientific importance. Perhaps the best description of this situation, in this case referring to the film industry, was made by R. Lane Fox in his introduction to the work *Hellas on Screen*, in which he admitted to being a late convert to this type of studies, before going on to state:

I was brought up to think that films were only to be watched on wet English afternoons. Otherwise, the cinema was a poor second best to hours spent in the fresh air. I also thought, in ignorance, that “film studies” were a feeble subject (they involved watching, not “self-improving” reading) and that their items of study were so down-market that scholars should waste no time on them. They were for under-powered minds who could not cope with ancient languages and had no idea of facts, contexts and social settings.³

By our reckoning, the constructs of the classical world in popular culture have become extraordinarily valuable. As a matter of fact, they are crucial for the way in which classical culture is understood nowadays. As Gonzales has stressed in his contribution to this book, “Il ne se passe pas une journée sans qu’une publicité, une bande dessinée, un roman ou une nouvelle, un film, une série télévisée, un dessin animé, une caricature,

² There is plenty of evidence confirming the good health of reception studies. The importance of this field of study has been attested, for instance, by the creation of several specialised series by prestigious publishing houses such as Brill, Oxford University Press and Blackwell. Likewise, in recent years journals specifically dedicated to this field have appeared, including the French publication *Anabases. Traditions et réceptions de l’Antiquité*, created in 2009 by a team researching into reception studies at the University of Toulouse, II, Le Mirail, and the *Classical Receptions Journal* published in Oxford since 2009. There is now such a large number of reception study publications that it is impossible to mention them all here – by way of example, see note 6 *infra*. The following works are good introductions to the object of study: Hardwick 2003; Martindale, Thomas 2006; Hardwick, Stray 2007.

³ Berti, García Morcillo 2008, p. 5. Lane Fox continues by saying in a congenial tone, “I freely admit to a conversion on the road to London’s Warburg Institute Library thanks to the blinding light of Hollywood. From 2002 to 2004 I was the historical consultant to the director Oliver Stone on his major movie, *Alexander*. My reward was to lead the Macedonian Companion Cavalry into battle at Gaugamela (in the Moroccan desert) and against Porus’s war-elephants (in the big Saraburi Botanical Arboretum in Thailand)”, p. 5.

une analyse politique ou culturelle ne vienne nous rappeler combien notre culture que d'aucuns veulent post-moderne est nourrie par un cadre référentiel spécifique qui singularise les cultures européennes". Sure enough, there are numerous examples, but suffice it to note the relevance of products such as the highly popular Asterix book series, which has been translated into many languages and whose recreation of antiquity has been essential in shaping current knowledge of the ancient world. Likewise, the proliferation of historical re-enactment groups are helping to reconstruct and reinterpret – to revive, one might say – a common past. Also worth mentioning is the success of movie blockbusters like *300* and *Gladiator* and the worldwide launch in 2013 of *Ryse: Son of Rome* for Xbox One, a new video game based on the history of the Roman Empire. A side product of this public interest in the classical world is attested by the growing popularity of Graeco-Roman archaeological sites, monuments and museums. To mention just two cases, almost seven million people visited the Colosseum and more than five million the Roman Forum in 2011. All these examples are proof of the centrality of classical history in popular culture, as well as the importance that these modern products have for the knowledge that modern Western societies possess of their past. So much so that it could be held that the transmission of the classical past is not now any longer a thing of textbooks and universities, but is mainly achieved by going to the cinema or watching a film on television, by playing a video or board game or by marching on modern battle fields in the company of contemporary legionaries.

The way in which the mass media reconstruct antiquity is also central to understanding how public institutions and political and cultural policymakers act, insofar as the popular version of the ancient world is, above all for European society, a reflection of its past, its memory and its collective identity. This past is continually harnessed for modern purposes, as can be seen, for example, in the reinterpretation of the conflict with the Persians in *300*, in order to elaborate on the current differences of opinion and disputes between the West and the East, especially after the Gulf War and the showdown with Al Qaeda. In this connection, the famous Spanish writer Arturo Pérez Reverte stated, in a leader entitled "Eran de los nuestros", that

Con el tiempo, Leónidas y los suyos hicieron posible Europa, la Enciclopedia, la Revolución Francesa, los parlamentos occidentales, que mi hija salga a la calle sin velo y sin que le amputen el clítoris, que yo pueda escribir sin que me encarcelen o quemen, que ningún rey, sátrapa, tirano, imán, dictador, obispo o papa decida – al menos en teoría, que

ya es algo – qué debo hacer con mi pensamiento y con mi vida. Por eso opino que, en ese aspecto, aquellos trescientos hombres nos hicieron libres. Eran los nuestros.⁴

For Europe, the challenges posed by the different interpretations that have been made of the ancient world, and their current implications, particularly the Christian and Graeco-Roman past of most of the region, were clearly evident in the difficulties that the European Union (EU) itself had in describing its common cultural roots in the ineffectual groundwork for the drafting of the European Constitution at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although a quote from Thucydides relating to Pericles' Funeral Oration was included at the beginning – in the first draft whose translation was not up to scratch (2003) – it was then eliminated from the final draft. Even in its most aseptic version, nonetheless, the Constitution (2004) was not unanimously accepted by all the Member States and, therefore, could not be adopted. The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) contains a revised version of the original document in which claims about the common cultural origin of the Member States are conspicuous by their absence. The clearest reference to a common past can be found in the preamble of the European Constitution, where it is stated that the Union draws inspiration “from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law”. A watered-down version, without history, maybe with the intention of being politically correct, but to which most of the citizens of the different signatory countries have reacted with indifference. The EU thus presents itself in its most important document as a sort of federation apparently without a prior historical or cultural union, as if the Member States comprising it did not share crucial characteristics and a common past. However, the defence of the accession of new members to the EU has also been carried out highlighting the belonging to a common classical past of Europe, as has been clearly shown in the recent case of Rumania.⁵

This work addresses the issue of antiquity in popular culture from a broad perspective in which both the most studied genres, such as films, comics and historical novels, and other lesser known ones, like fantasy and science fiction novels, and war and role games, have a place. What is involved is a type of study on which practically no literature existed at the end of the twentieth century, but with which a large number

⁴ Pérez Reverte 2007.

⁵ As regards this issue, see above all the reflections of Canfora 2004, p. 15-19, and Hansen 2008.

of publications now deal.⁶ Out of this group, due to the fact that they share similarities with our work as regards their concepts and approaches, we would like to highlight *Classics for all. Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture*,⁷ *L'Antiquité dans l'imaginaire contemporain. Fantasy, science-fiction, fantastique*,⁸ *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*⁹ and *Antiquity in Popular Literature and Culture*.¹⁰

Neither this scholarly interest nor these studies are new to the Departamento de Historia Antigua at the Universidad de Sevilla, to which we three editors of this monograph belong. Back in 1992, Professors Delgado and Ordóñez organised “Cinematografía y visiones del Egipto Antiguo”, a pioneering academic initiative at the time. The volumes entitled, *La Antigüedad como argumento*, which Professors Beltrán and Gascó, affiliated to the Departamento de Prehistoria y Arqueología and Historia Antigua, respectively, at the Universidad de Sevilla, dedicated to the study of the presence of the ancient world and its reinterpretation throughout history, have also provided an important basis for our ongoing research.

In recent years, moreover, the Departamento de Historia Antigua has organised courses and seminars revolving around the same theme. These include *La Antigüedad en el cine: Grandes personajes* (2007-2008) and *La Antigüedad en la novela histórica y el cómic* (2010). Lastly, an international congress with the title, *La actualidad del Mundo Antiguo: Recepción, recuperación y reinención de la Antigüedad en la cultura popular contemporánea*, with the participation of over 20 keynote speakers, was held in 2014. This monograph is a direct result of that congress, notwithstanding the fact that it contains a number of new works which were not presented at the time. The very title of

⁶ It would be impossible to list here, even perfunctorily, the large number of researchers who are currently dedicating their time to the study of antiquity in contemporary popular culture. Only as regards monographs, some of the works that have had a bearing on our approach to the issue include the following: Antela-Bernárdez, Sierra Martín 2013; Berti, García Morcillo 2008; Blanshard, Shahabudin 2011; Cano Alonso 2014; Cyrino 2005, Cyrino 2013; Duplá Ansuategui 2011; García Morcillo, Hanesworth, Lapeña Marchena 2015; Hobden, Wrigley 2018; Joshel, Malamud, McGuire 2001; Knippschild, García Morcillo 2013; Lillo Redonet 2010; Michelakis 2013; Nikoloutsos 2013; Nisbet 2008; Pomeroy 2008, Pomeroy 2017; Quiroga Fuentes 2014; Renger, Solomon 2013; Solomon 2001; Theodorakopoulos 2010; and Wyke 1997. There are also plenty of recent case study monographs. For example, we are particularly interested in the works published as part of the series *Screening Antiquity* by Edinburgh University Press, such as Augoustakis, Cyrino 2017; Cyrino 2015; Day 2016; Solomon 2016.

⁷ Lowe, Shahabudin 2009.

⁸ Bost-Fievet, Proveni 2014.

⁹ Rogers, Stevens 2015.

¹⁰ Dominas, Wesolowska, Trocha 2016.

the congress and the resulting monograph derive from foregoing considerations arising from the Departamento de Historia Antigua at the Universidad de Sevilla, where back in 1993 Fernando Gascó was already reflecting on “la Actualidad del pasado”, pointing out that this expression is employed to “indicar que algo ya acaecido, que fue o que tuvo su *floruit* tiempo atrás, mantiene una influencia más allá de lo que pudiéramos llamar su ‘ciclo de vida natural’”. In Gascó’s view,

Este enunciado está compuesto por dos fundamentos concurrentes aunque de distinta naturaleza. Por un lado, aquel por el que todo lo acaecido tiempo atrás se hace de una u otra forma efectivo en nuestro presente, sin mediar la intencionalidad o voluntad de nadie, y por otro lado, aquel fundamento por el que una sociedad determinada en un período concreto y por distintas circunstancias recupera de una u otra manera una parte de su pasado en el que desea reconocerse, encontrar su identidad o con el que desea “renacer” o renovarse.¹¹

It is our intention that this work should be an addition (a welcome one, we hope) to the above-mentioned recent literature on the subject and, more importantly, serve to expand on previous considerations. It provides overviews of specific genres, including both the most frequently studied hitherto (Antela-Bernárdez and Lillo Redonet) and those that have received less attention (Fletcher, Carbó García, Secci, Pérez Rubio and Aguilera Durán and Gómez Valero). In this last case, the authors were asked to provide a general introduction to the genre and how antiquity is portrayed in it. Besides these contributions, other authors have preferred to present new case studies that serve to increase the number of currently available examples (Sánchez Casado, Martínez Maza, Rosillo-López, Ferrer Albelda and Gordillo Hervás) or to contrast previous conclusions with new approaches (Romero Recio and Álvarez-Ossorio). All the studies, irrespective of whether they are more general approaches or case studies, have been grouped according to genre in three main sections, followed by a closing section (“Modern Uses of Antiquity: Some Reflections as a Mean of Conclusion”). The first two sections deal with “Antiquity in cinema and television” (Sánchez Casado, Antela-Bernárdez, Lillo Redonet and Martínez Maza) and “Antiquity in Literature and Comics” (Romero Recio, Rosillo-López, Álvarez-Ossorio, Ferrer Albelda and Gordillo Hervás). The third, entitled “Playing, Living and Experiencing Antiquity”, covers some of the less studied genres that have only recently attracted the attention of the academic community, one of whose main characteristics is that they propose fully immersive experiences in the ancient world (Fletcher, Carbó García, Secci and Gómez Valero).

¹¹ Gascó 1993, p. 9-10.

ANTIQUITY IN CINEMA AND TELEVISION

In “Lin blanc et peaux de léopard : le sacerdoce égyptien au cinéma”, Sanchez Casado approaches the way in which cinema has represented the priests of ancient Egypt by analysing a selection of different film sequences in which they play an especially interesting or important role. The author notes that even though these priests appear in a large number of film productions, they sometimes go unnoticed. In this regard, his analysis focuses on two concrete aspects: the iconography and the role played by these priests in the storyline. Using documents from primary sources, Sanchez Casado aims to determine the degree of historical accuracy and the clichés that have been repeated on the silver screen and which have shaped the collective imagination as regards ancient Egypt.

In “Agamenón siempre llama dos veces. Antigüedad, cine y remake”, Antela-Bernárdez performs an analysis of the history of ancient Greece in cinema by employing specific examples, with a view to reviewing the way in which the legacy of the classical world has been used, but without including period films in his study. His aim is to highlight those films that, due to their theme, can effectively be regarded as versions of the ancient Greek world. Thus, after selecting and analysing these remakes of ancient Greece, the author proposes classifying them in different categories: historically inspired films, mythological films, tragedies and those that include broader or vaguer references to antiquity. Using a variety of examples, Antela-Bernárdez thus stresses the dependence of current narrative models and storylines on the ancient world, especially ancient Greece.

In “Ancient Rome on the Screen: Spectacle, Heroes, Sex, Violence and a bit of History”, Lillo Redonet identifies the defining traits of the so-called “Roman movies”. In this context, the author observes that, according to the typical functions of films that follow the principles of classical rhetoric, *docere*, *delectare et movere*, this genre focuses above all on *delectare*, through being entertaining, and *movere*, through a storyline rife with human passions. Thus, Lillo Redonet reaches the conclusion that entertainment, heroes and heroines, as well as love, sex and violence, are the ingredients of a storyline much in demand by audiences and, therefore, those that best define “Roman movies”. Nevertheless, even when entertaining the public at large prevails over historical accuracy, these films also show “a bit of history”. Albeit, as the author himself notes, they sometimes provide more information on the moment and context in which they were made than on Roman history itself.

“The Classical Spirit of College Fraternities” focuses on how the negative picture of college fraternities painted by films and television does not correspond

to the original ideals and founding principles of these student organisations. In her contribution, Martínez Maza shows how these fraternities promoted the convenience of classical antiquity as an instrument at the service of the present for constructing a new future. Since their origins, their intellectual and political influence has revealed that knowledge of the classical world is a useful tool that could be put at the service of a new nation.

ANTIQUITY IN LITERATURE AND COMICS

By analysing a series of literary works, feature films and television series, in “Eternal Pompeii: a Present Roman City” Romero Recio portrays the image of the city of Pompeii that has been conveyed by these media to the public at large. There are many films, documentaries and novels that have recreated the final days of Pompeii “since the volcanic eruption seems to have given meaning to the existence of a city that would not have otherwise enjoyed such fame”. Stories revolving around the human sculptures shaped by the lava of Mount Vesuvius, the impossible love between masters and slaves or the interpretation of the catastrophe as a divine punishment for a corrupt pagan civilisation, saved and redeemed by the Christian god, are some of the topics covered in the majority of the film productions analysed by the authoress. Similarly, the works (novels, stories and even plays) of Spanish authors writing about the catastrophe that befell the city are particularly interesting, a point that Romero Recio emphasises in her contribution.

In “La novela histórico-policíaca de inspiración clásica: las mujeres detectives”, Rosillo-López studies the way in which writers combine the intrigue of solving a mystery with the recreation of a lost world, while taking into account its development pursuant to new historiographical trends in gender studies. The authoress analyses the feminine presence in detective stories, with respect to both the writers and the main characters of their stories, a genre that reached its height in the so-called “Golden Age”, during the inter-war years, with the “queens of crime fiction” such as Agatha Christie. Following this, Rosillo-López takes a look at the hard-boiled fiction genre and the historiographical advances in the study of women in antiquity, including the subject of female detectives in ancient Rome. Thanks to these advances in gender studies, women in the ancient world are doubtless given voice in Roman detective novels, as reflected by those featuring Claudia Seferino and Flavia Albia, set in the Roman imperial period.

In “Sword and Sorcery, and Something Else... The Ancient World and the Classics in Fantasy Novels”, Álvarez-Ossorio analyses the undeniable classical roots of the

greatest exponents of a narrative genre constituting one of the pillars of contemporary popular culture. *i.e.* the fantasy or sword and sorcery novel. To this end, he has selected the works that could be considered the most representative of this literary genre: the oeuvre of J. R. R. Tolkien and his *The Lord of the Rings*; G. R. R. Martin and his series *A Song of Ice and Fire*; the adventures of *Conan the Barbarian* created by R. E. Howard; and the saga *Elric of Melniboné* by M. Moorcock. However, the huge number of classical references appearing in these works, which could supply enough material for several works, has led the author to focus on four central ideas appearing in all of them, whose classical inspiration is unquestionable. Namely, the historical-geographical construction of those fantasy worlds, the mythical past of each one of them revolving around Atlantis, the existence of a place with strong magical connotations where the cult of death and slavery play a crucial role – *i.e.* a faithful reproduction of the vision that Graeco-Roman authors had of Egypt – and, lastly, the idea of the end of the Empire, clearly identified with Rome, and the beginning of a new age.

In “El Jabato: un atípico héroe del Franquismo ambientado en la Antigüedad”, Ferrer Albelda, for his part, provides the keys to understanding the comic hero created by Víctor Mora, to the author’s mind one of the best, if not the best, comic book scriptwriter in the golden age of Spanish comic history, from the 1940s to the 1960s. Sure enough, the ideology and life experience of Víctor Mora distanced the hero that he created from post-war archetypes such as *El Guerrero del Antifaz*, *Roberto Alcázar* and *Pedrin*. Although a typical product of Francoism, Ferrer Albelda’s analysis allows us to glimpse the historical causes that gave rise to the unconventional qualities of *El Jabato*.

Lastly, the detailed analysis that Gordillo Hervás performs in “Historical Fiction and Ancient Rome. Colleen McCullough’s ‘Masters of Rome’ Series” has two main objectives. On the one hand, to draw up a comprehensive list of historical novels set in ancient Rome. Nonetheless, as the authoress herself indicates, “due to the enormous amount of material, novels concerning the founding of Rome, the monarchical period, the Punic Wars, and the years following AD 476, as well as graphic novels or novels taking place in alternate or fictional universes, have not been included”. On the other, to analyse the work of Colleen McCullough and her “Masters of Rome”, a series of novels set in the late Republic and the imperial period. In this connection, Gordillo Hervás highlights the authoress’ efforts to convey the history of Rome to the public at large, thus constituting another useful tool for popularising classical antiquity.

PLAYING, LIVING AND EXPERIENCING ANTIQUITY

In his interesting contribution “Classical Antiquity, Heavy Metal Music, and European Identity”, Fletcher takes a look at how classical antiquity has been used in heavy metal, since studying this influence implies, in a way, analysing the history of this musical genre as a whole. During the new wave of British heavy metal (NWOBHM) at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, classical antiquity was already being used although in a sporadic and isolated manner. As the author explains, this situation would change with the advent of “Viking metal”, when in 1990 the Swedish black metal band Bathory released the studio album *Hammerheart*. Using many examples, Fletcher introduces readers to “Viking metal” and “Mediterranean metal”, terms that not only refer to the type of music but also to the lyrics, the topics covered and the appearance and image of the bands. Classical antiquity has not only caught on among heavy metal bands from different regions, but above all among those from countries with an indisputable classical past. These bands write songs about their origins and use antiquity to foster national identities which cannot be shared by all the European states. The author develops an interesting reflection in this respect, inasmuch as it is “a larger exploration of what national identity means in the face of the enlargement of the European Union and increasing Europeanization at the beginning of the twenty-first century”.

In “Living Antiquity. Role-Playing Games with a Setting in Ancient Times”, Carbó García analyses a selection of role-playing games set in antiquity with the aim of studying the relevance of historical and fictional elements in their design. The author demonstrates that the elements of fantasy defining them are greatly influenced by the mythology of different historical periods. Thus, the role-playing games analysed sometimes offer users a more or less faithful recreation of the historical context in question and other times not. As Carbó García notes, the importance of the design of these games is due to the fact that they are used as vehicles to popularise the ancient world in present-day societies.

On the understanding that ancient history is a source of inspiration for the production of video games, in “Antiquity in Video Games: Genres and Approaches” Secci studies the different ways in which history and mythology have been used in their creation. In this vein, the author observes that the influence of classical antiquity differs in terms of the different video game genres and their playability. Furthermore, Secci’s contribution shows how the impact of video games on modern societies, as well as their use of ancient history and mythology, has attracted the attention of historians. While scholars consider that the reception of classical antiquity should be a central