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**Arthur J. Pomeroy, *'Then It Was Destroyed by the Volcano'. The Ancient World in Film and on Television.* London: Duckworth, 2008. Pp. viii, 152. ISBN 9780715630266. £14.99; \$27.00 (pb).**

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Word count: 2118 words

In the last decade scholarship on the reception of antiquity in modern media has grown into an important strand of Classics, not without questioning the very classical nature of the latter. As the discipline of Classics has traditionally been at odds with itself since its main object of research, the ancient world, demands a multi- and even interdisciplinary approach, reception of antiquity has only increased this methodological stress. A classicist nowadays is expected to be initiated not only in the 'classical' human sciences like history, philosophy, philology and archaeology, but has to become acquainted with sometimes highly conceptual and rapidly evolving disciplines such as literary theory, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. Especially the study of what is termed 'popular culture' gave rise to a strong defensive reaction among classicists, which made the field of Classics end up in the famous educational 'culture wars' at the Anglo-American academia. Maria Wyke, whose work has been seminal to film studies in Classics, opens her 1999 essay 'Ancient Rome and the traditions of film history' by pointing at this very crux: "Films set in ancient Rome have often drawn the laughter, if not the outright contempt, of classicists. Why should classicists bother themselves with the inanities of such pompous, ephemeral farce when they have such rich, timeless materials to work with? And, if any book on such films by a classicist has first to confront the potential scorn of their own discipline, what possible utility would such a work have for serious scholars of history in film?" [1](#). Books on popular media by classicists face a double task: they must work to denaturalize the distinction between high and low culture in order to do justice to the various modern receptions of antiquity, of which classical scholarship is just one parcel, albeit a privileged one.

In his first book-length study on the reception of the ancient world on the screen, Arthur Pomeroy does not mention Wyke's essay but his approach raises the same issues. From his background as a social historian, contemplating not only the classical moments and monuments but also investigating the socio-cultural dynamics of an era, he aims at averting the impasse of high and low culture not merely by confronting modern film with the primary sources from antiquity, but also by tracing the cinematic history of each ancient theme. His research starts from the conviction that antiquity cannot be looked upon as the primordial benchmark for evaluating, let alone understanding films or television serials.

#### 1-6: Introduction

The study anthologizes several earlier papers and articles of the author, for the greater part about film. Pomeroy situates his work in the area of reception studies. Yet, he notes that scholars have paid but little attention to modern media like television and film, as they chose to focus on literature, art history and philosophy. [2](#) The goal of Pomeroy's work is "to show

why the ancient world has been and continues to be important to the modern by studying different themes in its film and television presentations" and by placing "these depictions of the past in a social and cultural context" (p.1). The study explores ancient themes in movies and television serials produced by Hollywood and by various national cinemas and broadcasting houses (esp. Italy, Greece, France, India and Japan). One criterion for the selection of the corpus was the general availability of the visual material, which is indeed a primordial concern for most scholars involved in Classics who only have libraries at hand. The book offers relevant film stills. Regrettably, most of the plates are coarse-grained.

#### 7-12: 1. The Actress and the Playwright

The first chapter starts with an interview with the actress Joan Collins in *Playboy*, in which she readily compares the AIDS crisis in the 1980s with the decline of Rome: "It's like the Roman Empire. Wasn't everybody running around just covered in syphilis? And then it was destroyed by the volcano." (p.7) Apart from proving that one can indeed read *Playboy* for the interviews, Pomeroy shows how ancient Rome still functions as a vessel for modern preoccupations and imaginations. It also indicates the ambivalent role of popular media in constructing images of Rome, since Collins was profoundly involved with modern and popular media rather than with ancient and scholarly sources. Pomeroy argues that many receptions of antiquity in popular film and television are determined by the cinematic corpus itself, that is, by previous adaptations within the genre. Yet, since the ancient past still offers models for the present, it should trigger the interest of classicists, even if their corpus is not the primordial source of these receptions. One could argue that the very appropriation of antiquity by modern media reinforces the classical value of antiquity as well as the usefulness of classical studies.

#### 13-28: 2. Hymns to the Ancient World in (the) Buffyverse

The first case study of the book is also the most complicated one, as it sets out to combine a difficult object, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a long-running television serial that began in the 1990s, with a programmatic approach, raising the problem of studying recent popular culture as a classicist. The title of the chapter tries to foreground the import of antiquity within the broad intertextual network that is activated by this postmodern television series, but the results of the reception analysis are rather scant. Two points are of particular interest here. Firstly, it is argued that the high school series is involved with antiquity, as classical languages and ancient history are still part of high school education. Because of its respected position in education policy, the presence of classics and antiquity in the high school genre is of sociological interest. Secondly, the Latin language is a traditional feature of the horror genre, due to its archaic solemnity. Mainly for this generic reason, it is frequently parodied in the postmodern vampire trash format. Pomeroy concludes the chapter by raising the question "whether the ancient world is a privileged source of cultural capital, or, more democratically, is but one choice in a multicultural world. The Classicist who ventures into this field with displays of hard-earned expertise runs the risk of beginning as trendy and ending as bore of the week." (p.28) Notwithstanding this lesson, Pomeroy unwearingly pursues his task as a classicist by unravelling the reception histories of different ancient themes in the next chapters.

#### 29-59: 3. The Peplum and Other Animals

This chapter records the history of the 'sandal-and-sword epic', a popular camp genre that has mainly been practised in the 1950s and 1960s in Italy. Two subgenres, the gladiator film and the 'peplum' (or superhero film, mostly figuring Hercules), are discussed at length. Although the ancient past provides the setting of these films, historical and archaeological data are mainly used to authenticate the exotic nature of the story. Most of these films function within the genre and rely on previous adaptations of antiquity, either in cinema, drama or literature, instead of on ancient sources. There are some echoes of social criticism in this genre, but as these movies were mainly destined for a working class audience, they generally celebrate the value of labour in the figure of the muscleman in order to reassure its audience: "The emphasis in such films on the protection of the weak from overpowering forces struck a nerve with the underprivileged and exploited." (p.37) At the end of the chapter, Pomeroy offers a new definition of the 'peplum' to avoid the generic blur that has been created by previous scholars: a peplum is "an exotic action drama in a technologically limited setting, involving a clear conflict between good and evil" (p.58). Curiously, this new definition implies that there is no specific need for antiquity to create a 'peplum'. This need would only have been the case in Italy, where the ancient material was at hand and where it could be employed to enter into competition with the superheroes of American film industry, such as Superman and Tarzan. One could wonder, however, why we should use a term derived from antiquity to cover such a wide-ranging genre.

#### 61-93: 4. The *Odyssey*, High and Low

This chapter offers a comprehensive and enthralling discussion of the various receptions of the *Odyssey* in cinematic history. It addresses a various range of films, from spaghetti westerns (Duccio Tessari's *The Return of Ringo*) over Hollywood productions (*O Brother Where Art Thou* from the Coen Brothers) to art-house films (Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris*). Due to the classical status of Homer, the *Odyssey* has a long tradition of reception in film, but the epos is deemed less attractive than the Iliadic episodes. In popular media the *Odyssey* is mostly echoed in road movies. Art-house cinema has tackled the classical status of the material to question the fusion of the classical past with the present. A case in point is the work of Theo Angelopoulos, who has associated the diaspora of the Greek and Balkan people with the *Odyssey*. Pomeroy thoroughly analyzes the cinematography of this most prominent Greek filmmaker, focussing on the tragic themes that define modern Greek history and which Angelopoulos relates to its ancient heritage.

#### 95-111: 5. Alexander the Hero

The figure of Alexander the Great gave rise to a very rich reception history, since "he is a controversial figure (as he was in his own era) whose depiction varies not only according to the times during which he is portrayed and differences in national cinema, but also in response to historical and novelistic treatments of his reign." (p.95) After a synopsis of Alexander's life, Pomeroy provides a more traditional reception analysis by focusing on the selection of the historical material by the filmmaker and on the possible motives for their selective approaches. In the main, these selections are said to have been based on either practical (technical and financial) reasons or on an overarching ideological message. Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1956) proclaims a socialism by depicting how individualism leads to social decline. Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), so Pomeroy argues, fails to provide the hero of liberalism that Stone would initially have been looking for: "[H]is liberalism is undermined by the orientalist fantasy of a Westerner discovering his sexuality in the East while providing leadership for the disorganised natives. [...] It is unlikely that a cinema that

seeks to appeal to an international market can offer an Alexander that does not betray the contradictions of liberal aspirations and imperial ambitions." (p.103)

The Western and Eastern classical traditions differ in their appraisal of Alexander the Great. For the West, Alexander is the powerful disseminator of Hellenic culture; for the East, he is the brute destroyer of Iranian civilization. Pomeroy also discusses a selection of Eastern depictions of Alexander the Great in which the military hero is turned back against Western imperialism. In Sohrab Modi's *Sikandar* (1941), Roxanne and Porus are the real heroes of the story, as they embody the Eastern values of love and martial honour that are lacking in Alexander. The Japanese animation *Reign: the Conqueror* (1999; dir. Yoshinori Kanemori) depicts a futurist world in which Alexander represents a boundless energy threatening the universe. Pomeroy concludes that "for the modern world remembrance of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds need not simply function as a warning, but suggests the possibility of fresh creation, locally and globally." (p.111)

113-114: 6. 'It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World'--except for Xena and Buffy

In the brief conclusion Pomeroy takes a look ahead at the future role of antiquity on the screen. The increasing use of computer graphics may help to overcome certain limitations that have withdrawn film makers from trying to recreate the ancient world. Even if antiquity would become retro rather than classical for future audiences, it will continue to provide artists with models and archetypes. These antiquities can be either idealized or subverted: "Still, the need to break from the past shows the continuing strength of the ancient world in the popular imagination" (p.114).

This book offers most valuable historical information on the evolutions of each ancient theme within cinematic history. Pomeroy brings an impressive filmography to the task, which firmly authorizes his arguments and the historical outlines he maps. He does not resort to more specialist approaches, such as film semiotics, or from dealing with reception theory. This makes the study less methodologically engaging but very accessible. At times, Pomeroy focuses too strongly on enumerating data rather than developing more substantial analysis, but his efforts to disclose an understudied field cannot be underestimated. Studying antiquity in popular culture is steadily becoming a new field of study, as can be seen by the 2009 anthology edited by Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin: *Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture*. This volcano is clearly no longer asleep.

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## Notes:

1. See Maria Wyke, "Ancient Rome and the traditions of film history." *Screening the past* 6 (1999): <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr0499/mwfr6b.htm>.

Significantly, the article has been published in a journal on film history and is not included in the author's bibliography on *L'Année Philologique*.

2. It should be noted, however, that a separate section of the *Blackwell Companion to Classical Receptions* (2007) is devoted to film.