

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/86552>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2019-04-26 and may be subject to change.

The Classical Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CAR>

Additional services for *The Classical Review*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Ancient Greece and Film (I.) Berti, Morcillo (M.) Garcia (edd.) *Hellas on Screen. Cinematic Receptions of Ancient History, Literature and Myth.* (HABES 45.) Pp. 267, pls. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008. Paper, €48. ISBN: 978-3-515-09223-4.

Maarten de Pourcq

The Classical Review / Volume 60 / Issue 02 / October 2010, pp 587 - 589
DOI: 10.1017/S0009840X10001228, Published online: 28 September 2010

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0009840X10001228

How to cite this article:

Maarten de Pourcq (2010). Review of (I.) Berti, and Morcillo (M.) Garcia 'Hellas on Screen. Cinematic Receptions of Ancient History, Literature and Myth' The Classical Review, 60, pp 587-589 doi:10.1017/S0009840X10001228

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

but rather came about arbitrarily through accidents of history and the intercession of individual men of genius. 'All writing systems were invented by single men' (p. 231). This includes the original invention of writing (by a Mesopotamian), the critical shift from semasiographic to lexigraphic writing (by a single man from Uruk), the innovation of wholly phonetic writing (by a Semitic genius), and the invention of the alphabet (by 'Palamedes'). Those who embrace a more evolutionary view, and think of writing, like speech, as natural and inevitable for the human species, will have a hard time swallowing P.'s reliance on 'accidents of history' and the 'intercession of individual men'. Those who subscribe to polygenesis will be disappointed that P. does not explain more convincingly how his model of monogenesis can account for the apparently independent occurrences of many of these innovations in Egypt, Crete, China and Mesoamerica, as well as in Mesopotamia and the Levant.

Many readers will already be familiar with P.'s theory, presented at length in *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet*, that the Greek alphabet was a single invention that took place at a single time by a single individual with the specific purpose of recording the Homeric epics. He even ventures that Palamedes, in myth the Trojan-era enemy of Odysseus, may have been the inventor's actual name. P. has here extended his theory about the historical development of Greek alphabetic writing by applying it to other major developments in the history of the world's writing systems. Readers unfamiliar with P.'s views on Homer and the Greek alphabet should be aware that they are based on absence of evidence rather than on evidence, that they rely on possibilities rather than proofs, and that they assert a causal connection between the introduction of alphabetic writing and the recording of the Homeric epics when all that probably exists is a temporal one (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*). They do not offer strong analogical evidence for the supposition of similar developments elsewhere.

Saint Olaf College

STEVE REECE
reece@stolaf.edu

ANCIENT GREECE AND FILM

BERTI (I.), GARCIA MORCILLO (M.) (edd.) *Hellas on Screen. Cinematic Receptions of Ancient History, Literature and Myth*. (HABES 45.) Pp. 267, pls. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008. Paper, €48. ISBN: 978-3-515-09223-4.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X10001228

This new volume on film and Greek antiquity is a diverse and very well informed collection of essays, written by classicists and ancient historians of various European nationalities who are not the usual suspects in this area. It shows how productive and widespread interest in film studies has become within the field of Classics. Given the classical background of the authors, it does not come as a surprise that the main impetus of the collection is historical. Most authors examine the cinematic representation of Greek antiquity either with reference to its historical context or by addressing the question of historical representation. In so doing, they offer a set of stimulating approaches that vary from cultural, historical and more theoretical accounts to studies in the classical tradition, retracing the chain of receptions that preceded the film version. Most contributions manage to weave

moments of sound interpretation into the inevitably numerous recountings of film scenes and sources. Whereas some articles try to make sense of a particular film (Fernando Lillo Redonet on Rudolph Maté's *The 300 Spartans*, and both Ivana Petrovic and Angelos Chaniotis on Oliver Stone's *Alexander*) or engage with an artistic *œuvre* (Filippo Carlà discussing the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini), others undertake a more systematic exploration of an ancient theme throughout the history of film (Eleonora Cavallini on Phryne, Anja Wieber on Alexander the Great, Herbert Verreth on Odysseus, B. on Damon and Pythias), or focus on a cinematic genre (Martin Lindner on children's animated films, Luigi Spina on the 'peplum', Pantelis Michelakis on silent cinema). Nacho Garcia's article on classical sceneries and G.M.'s piece on Greeks in Roman films complete the list. Oliver Stone's *Alexander* appears in three of the essays, but the perspectives are complementary. It also testifies to the academic freshness of the topic and the historical importance that is nowadays granted to this film. Not only has this epic war movie, along with Zack Snyder's *300*, made Greek antiquity much more attractive for popular cinema than before, but there has also been no precedent to Stone's biopic in the history of classical cinematic receptions in terms of historiographical support and how this support has been publicly displayed. Oxford professor Robin Lane Fox, who was Stone's official historical adviser and authored a well received 'making of', wrote the preface to this volume. The Editors made one general bibliography at the end of the book; it is regrettable that they did not include a filmography.

One particular virtue of this collection is that, even though it has a great variety of perspectives without much of a guiding conceptual framework, the authors all share the idea that films engaged with depictions of Greece do not need to be historically correct. One could say that they all follow the lead of Oliver Stone arguing about his *Alexander*: 'This is not a documentary. It is a dramatisation' (p. 201). Though this idea is taken for granted by most contributors, it could have been addressed somewhat more profoundly. It is worth noting that, in contrast to Stone's dictum, the truth value of documentary representations has more than once been contested, not only theoretically or poetically (they are always 'dramatisations' too) but also from an ideological point of view. Recall, for instance, Chris Marker's documentary on Greek culture *The Owl's Legacy* (1989), produced for Greek television but suppressed for being too harsh on Greek identity. The film is still kept away from both broadcasting and distribution by the Greek government. It is a pity that such cases remain absent from projects like 'Hellas on Screen', all the more so because they offer a means to participate in public debate and to show how such questions may intersect with academic research. This obviously requires other specialisms than those offered by a traditional training in classical scholarship. But from an academic point of view studying the narrative and the politics of documentary films or engaging with the potential interplay between fiction and documentary could tell us more about how Hellas has been projected on screen.

The corpus and the research questions of this volume are mostly traditional, though this does not necessarily reduce their merits. Most contributors work with the ideas of the classical tradition (looking for instance at the 'lineage' of a theme from antiquity through to modern times in an evolutionary fashion) rather than addressing current issues of classical reception studies. This can be clearly shown by the overall interest in the aesthetic tradition rather than in the institutional history of a particular film or theme. Not unsurprisingly, most authors apply methods from classical scholarship to their case studies and give little attention to methodo-

logical developments in the field of film or cultural studies. The contributions on classical scenery and children's animated films do make a case for more generic approaches but remain rather timid. A contribution that stands out in this respect is the probing piece by Pantelis Michelakis, who manages to combine cultural history with an accessible post-classical narratological analysis of the Oedipus myth in silent cinema, a fascinating era in film history that remains understudied from the perspective of classical receptions. Moreover, it is regrettable that the volume did not seize the opportunity to include the reception of antiquity in non-Western cinematic traditions. It lacks cross-cultural comparisons and does not fully address the potential cultural hybridity of certain 'classical traditions', whereas in the area of reception studies this interest is clearly growing (see for this the work on post-colonialism by Lorna Hardwick or the upcoming volume on the global reception of Sophocles edited by Helene Foley). The perspective of this study is predominantly Western, even despite the admirably encyclopedic nature of most articles. For future collective projects it could be fruitful to collaborate with scholars from other fields and other cultural perspectives, if only to prevent research on antiquity in film being undertaken only by classical philologists and ancient historians.

Radboud University, Nijmegen

MAARTEN DE POURCQ
m.depourcq@let.ru.nl

HELEN IN ENGLISH

MAGUIRE (L.) *Helen of Troy. From Homer to Hollywood*. Pp. xviii + 258, ills. Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Paper, £17.99, €21.60 (Cased, £50, €60). ISBN: 978-1-4051-2635-9 (978-1-4051-2634-2 hbk).

doi:10.1017/S0009840X1000123X

The best way forward for Reception Studies is forging links with other disciplines, where the receptions are studied in their own right. Therefore a book by an Oxford Professor of English on the reception of a major Greek mythological figure should, in principle, be welcome. And on balance, this is a useful book.

It is not, however, as the blurb describes it, 'a comprehensive account of the ways in which Helen's story has been told and retold'. At less than 300 pages, comprehensiveness is impossible. The reader will search in vain for Hector Berlioz's opera *Les Troyens*. Paintings are underrepresented; the only two illustrated are versions of *Helen on the Ramparts*, by Gustav Moreau and Frederick Leighton. Though others are mentioned, well-known works such as Evelyn de Morgan's 1898 *Helen of Troy* are quickly dealt with. M.'s horizons are more circumscribed, concentrating on the written word. She generally avoids non-Anglophone works (hence she is more interested in K. Hesketh-Harvey's 2006 adaptation of *La Belle Hélène* than in Offenbach's original), 'political and religious uses of the Helen myth' and 'stage histories of plays and their Helen actresses' (p. 205); fair enough, but it would have helped if such statements were made at the beginning of the book. What she does say right at the start (p. ix) is that she is not seeking to investigate any historical reality behind the myth of Helen.

Even the subtitle slightly misleads. There is plenty about Homer, but not as much as one might expect about Hollywood. Robert Wise's 1956 movie *Helen of Troy* merits only one mention; whilst Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004) gets more,