

Amanda POTTER, Hunter GARDNER (eds.), *Ancient Epic in Film and Television*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022 (Screening Antiquity), X + 286 pp., ISBN 9781474473743 (hb.), 9781474473774 (Epub), 9781474473767 (PDF), £90.00 (all formats).

This collection of essays dealing with the relationship between ancient epic, film, and television is the tenth instalment in the Edinburgh University Press series “Screening Antiquity” launched in 2015 by Monica S. CYRINO and Lloyd LLEWELLYN-JONES with ‘Rome’ Season Two: Trial and Triumph¹.

The title of the present volume sounds highly promising but does not – and could not – deliver such a promise on its barely three hundred pages. The editors of the collection make it clear from the outset when they define their purpose as significantly less ambitious but still exciting: to explore why and how 21st-century television series consistently display more epic qualities than contemporary, so-called epic Hollywood films.

As expected, when dealing with the continuity of epic from ancient to our times, considerable energy is spent discussing the contemporary meaning and usage of the word ‘epic’, including a review of previous such debates. Already in 1984, Derek ELLEY, in his Routledge volume *The Epic Film. Myth and History*, attempted and, to all intents and purposes, seemed to have succeeded in “redefining the word *epic* in a filmic context” (p. 1). Almost three decades later, at Routledge in 2011, Robert BURGOYNE edited a volume, *The Epic Film in World Culture*, whose fifteen co-authors displayed no hesitation in applying the term to a large variety of films, whether related to classical Antiquity or not, and reflected instead on “the contradiction between the traditional messages embedded within epic form – the birth of a nation, the emergence of a people, the fulfilment of a heroic destiny – and the long history of the epic film as an international, global narrative apparatus not bound by nation or ethnicity” (p. 2). Two years later, Joanna PAUL felt the need to reopen the argument and further review the relationship between classical epic and epic cinema, a topic, in her opinion, neglected by scholars, and published her book *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition* in the OUP’s series “Classical Presences” (see especially pp. 1–34 and *passim*). She maintained her position concerning the bond between ancient and contemporary epic. She reinforced it by concluding that “aspects of the classical epic tradition keep on making their presence felt in cinema [...] with enough force to insist that there are grounds for claiming continuity between text and film” (p. 306). By returning to the ‘epic debate’, the editors of the present volume acknowledge a certain unease in using PAUL’s concept of a “network of connections between different kinds of epic” as these are vastly dissimilar in so many aspects. My own exploration of classical reception in audiovisual culture convinced me that constructs such as genres that originate on the theoretical side of art and have to be repeatedly redefined do not endure: only storytelling withstands time and evolves in true continuity. But this is an argument for another time and place.

¹ Seven years earlier, in 2008, CYRINO published a collective volume on the first season of the show entitled *‘Rome’ Season One. History Makes Television* at Blackwell Publishing. Various other publishers have been initiating in the 21st century similar series on classical reception. The first that comes to mind is the Oxford University Press’ series “Classical Presences” with 122 impressive titles (2005–2022) already published, then Brill’s “Metaforms”, “Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception” or “Wiley Blackwell Handbooks to Classical Reception”; there were also volumes on reception within larger series, like the “Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World” – enough to fill a large bookcase and as most of them are collections of essays authored by dozens of scholars each, enough as well to induce nystagmus or old-fashioned confusion.

Even if the volume's purpose is clearly focused on the questions of how and why recent television series appear more epic than films, the full spectrum of media announced in the title – film and television – is further redacted by the authors, who limit themselves to a few selected films and television shows. The only exception is Jon SOLOMON's essay in which he shares insightful reflections with the reader, drawn on his database of allusions to the word "epic", Homer as a figure, the *Odyssey*, and the *Iliad*, found in films produced between 1984 and 2019. Out of over 150² such allusions, he selects, for his otherwise illuminating discussion, only "the most typical or successful examples" without defining his selection criteria (p. 33). Still, it is regrettable that the book does not offer an equivalent analysis of allusions to epic in television shows during the same or a comparable period.

The volume breaks into two parts; the first, six chapters long, deals with the ancient epic in feature films, and the second, offering seven chapters, centres on television, mainly on series. The first part begins with Dan CURLEY's (pp. 17–32) essay on "epic spatiality: the genre strategies for presenting and negotiating space" (p. 17). He identifies and discusses five displays of spatiality shared by ancient epic poetry and some twenty hundred years younger epic films, showing a subtle and impressive understanding of both. Called projections, these displays deal first with epic being a capacious genre accommodating much more than just the proverbial kings and battles and the unavoidable romance; the diversity of content requires lots of room, which translates into a considerable length. The second projection concerns the space on the screen. The author compares the wonder of the 20th-century widescreen, still remembered by the generation that witnessed its invention, and the regular and expected corresponding digital standard to the equivalent provider of space in epic poetry, the full dactylic hexameter, a metre serious enough to carry and house the entire glorious content. The third projection deals with vast spaces, spectacular vistas, and cityscapes. The fourth is the epic's ability to reach across space and time; the fifth is the opening of epic space for other genres, such as tragedy and elegy. CURLEY concludes that this capacity to create more space is typical of both poetry and screen epic and that it guarantees the genre's dynamic evolution.

As an example of audiovisual epic, CURLEY mainly discusses two movies, Benioff's and Peterson's *Troy* (2004), an adaptation of the *Iliad*, and Alejandro Amenábar's *Agora* (2009), a romanticised Spanish biopic on Hypatia, the 4th–5th-century CE Alexandrian philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer.

SOLOMON's (pp. 33–48) contribution, placed after CURLEY's chapter, deals, as was mentioned above, with allusions to epic in films; his reasoning leads to a reassuring conclusion that these frequent references to Antiquity reach myriads of people and constitute a highly effective tool for increasing awareness of classical tradition among the general public. This view appears overly optimistic. A classical allusion, whether intentional or not – SOLOMON makes that distinction – goes over the head of a less knowledgeable viewer unless it is an explicit and instructive mini-story, understandable to all. Otherwise, only if these references are used often and consistently may we share the hope of Mr. King, the Classics Master in Kipling's *Regulus*: "A little of it sticks among the barbarians" (see the end of the text at: <https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/tale/regulus.htm>). On the other hand, we all have examples of children who were drawn to the study of classics³ influenced by films inspired by Antiquity.

² SOLOMON's entire collection of allusions to antiquity in film includes an impressive 1500 entries. How interesting and valuable it would be to reception scholars if it were hosted on an open-access website? We are still technologically far away from searchable databases of texts and images in audiovisual productions, comparable to thesauri and concordances available for the study of ancient authors.

³ Kirsten DAY mentions the case of Gore Vidal and Jon Solomon in her introduction to *Celluloid Classics: New Perspectives on Classical Antiquity in Modern Cinema*, Arethusa XLI 2008, p. 5, n. 5.

Emma J. STAFFORD (pp. 49–65), well versed in everything Herculean⁴, after devoting one-third of her chapter to deftly guiding the reader through the maze of ancient sources of Herakles' myth, reviews movies made about the hero at various times of film history and concludes that the tales of the twelve labours imposed an episodic treatment of the myth. She discusses the burdensome legacy of Herculean peplum, which brought Greek mythology closer to the distinctly Romanised Hollywood epic. In the late 20th century, the five television movies preceding the series *Hercules. The Legendary Journeys*, reinforced by Disney's *Hercules* and the *Journeys*' spinoff *Xena: Warrior Princess*, come in like a tsunami creating a surfeit of Herculean stories rather far removed from the ancient sources. The later films about Herakles (i.e., Harlin's *The Legend of Hercules*, Ratner's *Hercules* and Lyon's *Hercules Reborn*) decisively part ways with the myth, or possibly even with common sense. STAFFORD discusses and, rather surprisingly, approves of these three 2014 *nanars en jupettes*, as the French aptly call poor cinematographic renderings of classical Antiquity. Having watched the three movies as they were coming out, the first one in January and the other two in July of the same year, I was at first worried that they were a harbinger of doom; a slide of the genre into a rabbit hole similar to the depressing niche of Christmas movies. I was so relieved when the film industry let the overused theme of Herakles & Co. rest in peace for eight years now⁵. Still, it would be difficult to convince someone passionate about Herakles' reception in film that every new movie about the hero is not a gift. STAFFORD is one of several scholars who speak kindly of the 2014 neo-peplum trio or, at least, treat it seriously, as is their right⁶.

The review of ancient sources contrasted with the state of the myth's cinematographic reception led STAFFORD to conclude that filmmakers distracted by the episodic nature of Herakles' story never managed to produce its truly epic version. In her view, it should take the form of an extended television series faithfully covering the story described in the anonymous 15th Homeric Hymn to Herakles the Lionhearted. She provides her own superb translation of the nine hexameters in question. If it were posted on social media, it could have caught the attention of a showrunner in search of a topic; someone who otherwise is highly unlikely to consult a scholarly volume such as this. A lost opportunity for the public.

Jennifer REA (pp. 66–81) traces common threads between the *Aeneid* and the South-Korean/Czech 2013 English language dystopian film *Snowpiercer* (based on a 1982 French graphic novel, *Le Transperceneige*, by Jacques Lob, Benjamin Legrand and Jean-Marc Rochette) and considers them companion texts. The film director, Bong-Joon Ho, is a very articulate and talented intellectual who has generously explained his vision and directorial choices in the media, never indicating any intentional reference to Virgil. REA acknowledges that the film is not classically inspired but maintains that both the Roman epic poem and the contemporary movie deal with comparable universal challenges. While it is undoubtedly fascinating to identify companion texts to the ancient

⁴ Author of *Herakles* in 2012, in the Routledge series "Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World", edited by Susan DEACY; of a contribution on Herakles to the 2018 volume in "Screening Antiquity" series entitled *Epic Heroes on Screen*; co-editor of three volumes in Brill's "Metaforms": with Arlene ALLAN and Eva ANAGNOSTOU-LAOUTIDES of *Herakles Inside and Outside the Church* (February 2020); with Alastair J.L. BLANSHARD of *The Modern Hercules* (November 2020), and with Valerie MAINZ of *The Exemplary Hercules from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and Beyond* (January 2021). The fourth volume, *Hercules Performed*, is expected provisionally in late 2023–early 2024.

⁵ In television during that time, the Herakles myth was paraphrased in 2016, season 5 of Kitsis & Horowitz' *Once Upon a Time*; however, the hero is cast only in the supportive role of the young Herc trapped between the world of the living and the transitory Underbrook (purgatory).

⁶ See three contributions to the 2018 Edinburgh University Press volume *Epic Heroes on Screen*, edited by Antony AUGUSTAKIS and Stacie RAUCCI: A.J.L. BLANSHARD, *Hercules: The Mythopoeitics of New Heroism*, pp. 28–32, 37–41; E. STAFFORD, *Hercules, Putin, and the Heroic Body on Screen in 2014*, pp. 43–59; and Angeline CHIU, *Heroes and Companions in "Hercules"* (2014), pp. 60–73.

masterpieces, are these texts instances of reception or the universality of themes considered important for all times?

If the book's purpose is to explore the epic qualities of television series vs films, then why is the popular television series *Snowpiercer*, going soon into its 4th season, not included in the analysis? The series was created and evolved with the approval and participation of Bong-Joon Ho, the executive producer; the television show, logically, must be considered part of the same story. The series is a cross between the film's reboot and a prequel: the action begins seven years (not seventeen, like in the movie) after the failed attempt to stop global warming transformed the planet into a frozen desert. The dystopian world is the same as in the 2013 film. Still, the dramatic events cascading in the television series would have broken down the net of similarities and clashes with the *Aeneid* identified by REA and removed any reason to view the ancient and the modern text as companions. Still, the exercise is appealing and beneficial as it highlights the universal aspects of themes displayed in ancient epic poetry as one of the reasons why we continue to admire it.

The Japanese film, *Thermae Romae* (dir. Hideki Takeuchi), discussed by Monica CYRINO (pp. 82–97) in the next chapter, is one of several adaptations of the popular manga authored by Mari Yamazaki. *Thermae Romae Novae*, a 2022 original net animation (ONA) series of eleven episodes, covers the 128 CE bath architect Lucius Modestus' time-travelling adventures in present-day Japan. The ending segments feature Yamazaki's visits to various famous hot springs, the presentation of their history and the many recreational and health benefits on offer. This latest adaptation further confirms CYRINO's view about the so-called media mix strategy, frequently used in Japan: a new addition to the mix is web anime. The main theme of CYRINO's chapter is the juxtaposition of the Roman empire and modern Japan, the two countries in the world that brought public baths to the level of a cultural institution. According to CYRINO's thoughtful and convincing analysis, the film constitutes a nostalgic look at the imperial past, a look not devoid of simple comedy and self-deprecatory humour. Curiously, this concept of "empire nostalgia", coined by the author, is absent from either the manga itself or from the 2022 web anime, where similarities and differences are used as a source of amusement, and the leading theme centres on civilised bathing customs and the benefits of mineral springs tested, for millennia.

Kirsten DAY's chapter (pp. 98–117) is a good transition between the first and the second part of the book, as it discusses the negative portrayal of women in Greek mythology, in film since the 1950s, and television series since the 1990s. It focuses on the examples of Helen of Troy paired symbolically with the Trojan Horse as devious and lethal instruments and of Pandora forming an obvious and just as lethal tandem with her jar. DAY points out the symbolism linking women to horses in Semonides of Amorgos, Anacreon, Theocritus, and Euripides, as well as presenting Helen and Pandora as agents of destruction in, for instance, Hesiod and Aeschylus. DAY's reasoning and the evidence she presents supporting it are certainly stimulating, if not entirely convincing.

At the beginning of part II, primarily dealing with 21st-century television series, Sylvie MAGERSTÄDT (pp. 119–134) wonders why *Olympus* (2015) and *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018) failed to attract high numbers of viewers. She answers that both shows lack the essential elements of character development and a coherent plot, failing to engage the audience's feelings. MAGERSTÄDT clearly differentiates between *Olympus*, hampered by a low budget, bad acting, and heavy green-screen use and the no-expense-spared BBC-produced *Troy: Fall of a City*, concluding that critics had no pity when condemning the former; however, their high praise did not help the latter get better audience ratings. The author implies that these two television series were the only recent adaptations of Greek myths, for some reason ignoring another contemporary BBC production, the 2013–2015 *Atlantis*, which, contrary to *Olympus* and *Troy: Fall of a City*, gained a vast and loyal audience but was somewhat surprisingly axed after just two seasons. Possibly, MAGERSTÄDT's unstated reason for excluding the series from her analysis was precisely its success with the public because the epic quality of *Atlantis* is certainly no less evident than that of *Olympus*.

Fiona HOBDEN (pp. 135–151) provides a very pleasant surprise by giving voice to a genre rarely studied, documentaries on classical Antiquity, to be precise, four documentaries about Odysseus'

travels (2009–2018): *Clash of the Gods* (2009), a ten-part series produced by the channel History, with two episodes about Odysseus, from the sack of Troy, via Lotus-Eaters and Laestrygonians to Circe, Hades, and home to Ithaca; *Gods and Monsters: Homer's Odyssey* (2010), written and presented on BBC4 by the poet Simon Armitage who sets out to show a renewed story of Odysseus and blends fragments of the *Odyssey* with his own retelling of the myth; *Sur les traces d'Ulysse* (2017), a Swiss Radio and Television “investigative travelogue” led by Nina Mavis Brunner, who in six episodes follows Odysseus’ itinerary visiting Turkey, Tunisia, Italy, Spain, and Gibraltar; her discussions with locals are interspersed with animation sequences; *Akala's Odyssey* (2018) is presented on the BBC4 by a poet – hip-hop artist Akala. His artistic quest is to compose a response to Homer. HOBDEN concludes that documentaries provide a mirror to *Odyssey*, reflecting the great story from a variety of perspectives and colouring it with contemporary tendencies and trends.

Hunter GARDNER (pp. 152–167) views the *Odyssey* as a ‘cultural companion’ to HBO’s *Game of Thrones*. Her extensive and densely presented argument requires a solid grasp of the series’ intricate plot, making it a challenge to follow and fully appreciate. GARDNER investigates the occurrence of epic motifs such as *xenia*, the laws of hospitality, and *nostos*, a return home, tied in with a quest for justice to be rendered for endured hardships, a quest which may become a desire for revenge. The powerfully shocking scenes of slaughter, namely the Red Wedding massacre and the burning of King’s Landing by Daenerys Targaryen, are compared to Odysseus’ killing of the suitors in violent retribution for imposing their arrogant presence on his family in an attempt to force his wife to wed again, aggravated by the disrespectful treatment of himself disguised as a beggar. Analysing instances of Daenerys’ revenge through the prism of epic themes, in particular, *nostos* and the distinction between seeking justice and exacting retribution, makes it easier – according to GARDNER – to accept the repeatedly and cruelly wronged Targaryen heiress’ behaviour inconsistent with her previous tolerance and compassion.

Like most, if not all of the contributors to the book’s second part, Jo WYNELL-MAYOW (pp. 168–184) refers to Homer to gauge the epic qualities of a television series. She focuses on the “spectacle of war” in the *Iliad* and compares it with battles in Gough & Millar’s series *Into the Badlands*, which aired on AMC from 2015 to 2019. The show is an SF /*wuxia* (martial arts filmed with wirework) presenting an apocalyptic world divided between ruthless warlords who control slavery-based societies and command troops excelling in martial arts instead of pre-apocalyptic firearms. WYNELL-MAYOW discerns in *wuxia* combats, led half a millennium into the future, an affinity with ancient Homeric battles, specifically duels, which feel “very much like a performed spectacle” (p. 168). The stylised aspect of fights is undoubtedly a shared characteristic of both the *Iliad* and *Into the Badlands*, with divine intervention in Homer corresponding to supernatural powers (whether real or perceived) of the post-apocalyptic fighters, both requiring from the audience a suspension of disbelief.

And we are back to analysing the *Iliad*, this time as a source text for television series presenting intense relationships between male characters. Lynn KOZAK (pp. 185–200) successfully argues that the interactions between the two main characters in NBC’s 2013–2015 *Hannibal*, an FBI profiler (Will Graham) and a serial killer/ forensic psychiatrist (Hannibal Lecter), are imagined on the template provided by the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. The series creator, Bryan Fuller, shines a bright light on the similarity in S02E12 *Tom-wan* when Will and Hannibal compare themselves to the Homeric heroes and stress the strong empathetic capacity Will shares with Patroclus. Their relationship, just like the one between Achilles and Patroclus, is not crystal clear due to confusion about their roles between friend, mentor, beloved friend, and presumably but never explicitly, lover; their blurring identities become, to a certain degree, interchangeable. KOZAK concludes that “both *Hannibal* and the *Iliad* present central relationships between two men that defy definitions and exceed expectations” (p. 199).

Meredith SAFRAN (pp. 201–216) reflects on the function of the Lords of Kobol in the 2003, 2004–2009 *Battlestar Galactica* compared to the Olympians ruling the ancient world as related by Homer and Virgil. She concludes that the antagonist Cylons, humanoid AIs, reflect the Homeric

and Virgilian Pantheon with more affinity. There are twelve models of immortal Cylons as there are twelve Olympians, their role is to ensure that fate remains the highest authority. While they have more power than humans, this superiority does not prevent them from closely connecting with and favouring specific individuals. SAFRAN's 16-page long chapter is divided into five subsections, but it does not facilitate tracking the flow of the author's argument, which seems to fade buried in the wealth of minor details.

Amanda POTTER (pp. 217–232) delivers the closing frame to the volume, which opened with a discussion of the meaning of the word 'epic'. POTTER, also one of the book's editors, snaps the buckle in place by establishing how and when viewers of two entirely different but verifiably popular television series use the e-word, as anybody who conscientiously read the entire last instalment of "Screening Antiquity" is entitled to call it. Two types of audience studies provide data for the chapter: first, *Game of Thrones* Audience Research Project was conducted internationally in 2016–2017⁷ using an online survey that obtained over 10,000 responses to the survey questionnaire. POTTER selected four questions she considered promising for her purpose and reviewed the answers. Unfortunately, without access to the published study, it is impossible to agree or disagree with her choice of questions. Her analysis of how respondents used the word 'epic' appears detailed and exhaustive – she was presumably able to include all uses of the word – but its usefulness remains unconvincing. The author herself conducted the second survey (significantly different from the first) online, addressing it to viewers of the 1st season of *His Dark Materials*. 165 responses were received, which, in my view, is an insufficient number to elicit valid data on linguistic practices. Still, it may certainly serve as an indication of the use of the word by a specific segment of viewers strictly defined by time, region, and the show they watched. POTTER's conclusion appears logically and intuitively defensible: "*Epic* continues to be a marker for what twenty-first-century viewers think of as quality, popular and successful" (p. 229).

Joanna PAUL's *Afterword* (pp. 233–239), written from the informed perspective of the author of a monograph published almost a decade earlier about the classical epic tradition and its reception in film⁸, neatly pulls together the thirteen chapters highlighting a rather obvious conclusion that they provide "multiple perspectives on the ongoing 'expansion' of the epic genre" (p. 233). PAUL formulates what, in her opinion, is one of the "core" achievements of the research presented in the volume, namely, that "the foundational narratives of the classical epic tradition – the Homeric epics – continue to be instrumental in the genre's development" (p. 234). While reassuring in its confirmation of a view held universally from the outset, such recapping of the thirteen stimulating chapters does not do justice to the efforts of scholars who, according to the editors of the series, represent cutting-edge, exciting, and original research.

To conclude this review, a few *nugae* which caught my eye. In the "Introduction", the family name of one of the contributors is misspelt twice, and the error is repeated in the Index. The gender preference of the same author (p. 11), declared in the bio, is ignored. As we all know, some typos are inevitable; one such is found in the index: a double entry for Agamemnon, the one referring to p. 101 should have been listed in italics, as it is the title of Aeschylus' play. In Jon SOLOMON's bio, there is an amusing mistake: *Genealogy of the Pagan God* (p. 276) instead of *Gods* – Boccaccio would have been perplexed.

Such minor inattentions do not detract from the value of the book. However, two straightforward issues could be easily corrected in any future volume of the series. The first concerns the readers' comfort and may only be my preference for footnotes: to look for the content of notes, the reader must first go to the endnotes and then continue to the bibliography to identify the references

⁷ Martin BARKER, Clarissa SMITH, Feona ATTWOOD, *Watching Game of Thrones: How Audiences Engage with Dark Television*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.

⁸ Joanna PAUL, *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 (Classical Presences).

fully. The second concern could be a simple oversight: to accompany the first book in the series, “Screening Antiquity’s” editors wrote their preface announcing the scope and goals of the series, then, somewhat surprisingly, reprinted the exact same text in all consecutive instalments, without any recognition or acknowledgement of the research filling the already published and scholarly significant volumes.

Elżbieta Olechowska
Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw
olechowska@al.uw.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-5708-3834