CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY AND THE CINEMATIC IMAGINATION

This book aims to enhance our appreciation of the modernity of the classical cultures and, conversely, of cinema's debt to ancient Greece and Rome. It explores filmic perspectives on the ancient verbal and visual arts and applies what is often referred to as *pre-cinema* and what Sergei Eisenstein called *cinematism*: that paintings, statues, and literature anticipate modern visual technologies. The motion of bodies depicted in static arts and the vividness of epic ecphrases point to modern features of storytelling, while Plato's Cave Allegory and Zeno's Arrow Paradox have been related to film exhibition and projection since the early days of cinema. The book additionally demonstrates the extensive influence of antiquity on an age dominated by moving-image media, as with stagings of Odysseus' arrow shot through twelve axes or depictions of the Golden Fleece. Chapters interpret numerous European and American silent and sound films and some television productions and digital videos.

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DIS MANIBVS

Homeri vatvm omnivm dvcis
Simonidis Cei
Dvridis Atheniensis
Zenonis Eleatae
Platonis Atheniensis
Aristotelis Stagiritae
T. Lvcretii Cari Romani
C. Valerii Catvlli Veronensis
P. Vergilii Maronis Mantvani
Heronis Alexandrini
Heliodori Emeseni

QVI PRAECIPVE VARIIS MODIS
ARTIS MAGNAE LVCIS ET VMBRAE ITEMQVE
FABVLARVM IMAGINIBVS MOVENTIBVS NARRATARVM
TAM ORIGINES QVAM ANALOGIAS
OCVLIS POSTERITATIS SVBIECERVNT
FELICITER

SACER HIC LIBER

non est mirum simulacra moveri
bracchiaque in numerum iactare et cetera membra.
nam fit ut in somnis facere hoc videatur imago.
quippe, ubi prima perit alioque est altera nata
inde statu, prior hic gestum mutasse videtur.

haec elegantissime cecinit in carmine
de rervm natvra composito Lvcretivs noster

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Preface

This book complements and extends my studies on classical antiquity and the cinema by presenting new approaches to some fundamental topics. These range from filmic perspectives on classical literature and visual art to the cinema's engagement with antiquity. The book demonstrates how and why modern technologies, which make possible complex visual narratives, can enhance our understanding and appreciation of ancient works long considered familiar. It also shows how extensive the influence of antiquity has been on the cinema and related media.

I have divided the topics to be addressed into five separate parts, according to larger thematic aspects. Part I consists of an introductory chapter, a fade-in that prepares the ground for the more advanced and specific topics that will follow. The two chapters of Part II are in the nature of what classical rhetoricians called *progymnasmata*: preparatory exercises. These are intended to alert readers living in an age dominated by image media to contemporary ways of seeing ancient art and literature. Thus Chapter 2 is a detailed analysis of a Greek vase painting that is as unique as it is mysterious. From its discovery until now, traditional scholars have never reached a consensus about its meaning and have proposed contra-dictory and mutually exclusive interpretations. On the basis of a critical survey of the reception history of this image, my chapter proposes an approach that has been entirely ignored so far. The chapter's aim is to offer a view of this painting that builds on earlier scholarship but extends it into the age of moving images. The chapter is as detailed as it is in order to be able to offer, as convincingly as possible, a first but fundamental introduc-tion to, and justification of, my approach in the following chapters: a new look at the old. Even long-established irresolution about an ancient work may be overcome when it can be related to later ones, even those of a kind not yet in existence at the time the original was created. The result is a deeper appreciation of the original artist's sophistication. By focusing on one ancient artwork, this chapter in particular exemplifies, and is

representative of, my intent with the present book as a whole. Serendipitously, the case I am attempting to make was already stated, both eloquently and concisely if without any thought of our media, well over a century earlier. In a 1910 lecture to students of history at Oxford, British historian, archeologist, and professor of Greek Sir John Myres put it like this:

> It is . . . one of the rare privileges of the historian, as of the poet, and the painter, to be always interpreting old facts, old problems, and old situations, to new minds; and to be interpreting them always, too, in the light of new knowledge, cast upon them from a fresh point of view. It is our duty, therefore, as well as our temptation, to take full toll of current knowledge, and the fresh discoveries of our time.[1]

Chapter 3 takes us to what has been regarded as the classical precursors of the cinema and its origin: Aristotle and the *camera obscura*. On the basis of the latter, the chapter then surveys what Pierre Francastel termed "pre-cinema" and what, before him, Sergei Eisenstein called "cinematism" in connection with ancient and later literature and visual arts: their implied cinematic nature *avant la lettre* (*et avant la chose elle-même*).[2] This chapter could be expanded significantly. Many of my earlier publications have dealt with aspects of classical pre-cinema. Here I provide a kind of *summa praecinematographica classica*.

The six chapters of Part III then offer detailed interpretations of cinematism in regard to major aspects of classical literature in epic and *epyllion*, a kind of brief epic (Chapter 4: Homer, Catullus, Virgil), philosophy (Chapters 5–7: Plato, Zeno, Lucretius), the novel (Chapter 8: Heliodorus), and tragedy (Chapter 9). In this central part of the book, I adhere to Eisenstein's views, summarized in Chapter 4, of the coherent development of all creative endeavors and technological progressions. These chapters also reveal a side of classical authors – poets, philosophers, novelists, technical writers – that may surprise some readers: their modernity even more than their timelessness. Such surprise could be observed in

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[1]   John L. Myres, *The Value of Ancient History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1910), 31–32. I turn to him again in Chapters 3 and 11.

[2]   *Cinematism*, the English version of the French noun *cinématisme*, corresponds to Eisenstein's original coinage *kinematografichnost'* ("cinematographicity"). Cf. the title of a French collection of Eisenstein's essays: S. M. Eisenstein, *Cinématisme: peinture et cinéma: Textes inédits*, tr. Anne Zouboff (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1980; new ed.: Dijon: Les Presses du Réel / Paris: Kargo, 2009). On the terms see Ada Ackerman, "What Renders Daumier's Art So Cinematic for Eisenstein?" in Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Notes for a General History of Cinema*, ed. Naum Kleiman and Antonio Somaini (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 255–265 and 487–488 (notes), at 487 note 11.

the comment by a scholar of classical novels on a previously published version of Chapter 9: "A bold but convincing 'screenplay.'"[3]

Part IV applies a reverse angle, as it were, to the preceding. In what could be called a kind of cinematic classicism, its three chapters examine specific ways in which filmmakers have interpreted complex, even enigmatic, text passages in Hellenistic epic (Chapter 10: Apollonius), in Homer's *Odyssey* (Chapter 11), and in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Chapter 12). Like the subject of Chapter 2, the texts here dealt with have posed great difficulties of interpretation. I examine my two epic passages in reverse chronological order of composition because the topic of Apollonius' missing description of the Golden Fleece is meant as preparation – again a kind of *progymnasma* – for the next one: Odysseus shooting an arrow through twelve axes. Neither my own points in these two chapters nor the films that I adduce or their makers' approaches contain any definitive solutions, but all can contribute, in some cases significantly, to our understanding of the fascinating nature of the originals. Chapter 12 addresses the topic of cathartic violence and juxtaposes *The Bacchae* by Euripides to *The Wild Bunch*, a controversial work by a filmmaker who had been fascinated by Aristotle's *Poetics* since his student days. This chapter differs in execution if not in approach from those preceding it since it deals with a single film. Part V is a brief fade-out, with Chapter 13 returning to the *camera obscura* and closing with a few favorite moments, one never seen, in my final films.[4]

Anyone writing about an extensive topic like mine inevitably encounters a dilemma: what to include and what to omit – in other words, where to draw the line in pursuing a particular theme or aspect. (In homage to Eisenstein, I might call this my own *montage principle*.) Different readers

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[3] Silvia Montiglio, *Love and Providence: Recognition in the Ancient Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 107 note 3. Her assessment is charming and welcome; I have only a small quibble about her *but*.

[4] Chapters 8–10 and 12 have been revised, expanded, and updated from earlier publications: "The Face of Tragedy: From Theatrical Mask to Cinematic Close-Up," *Mouseion*, 3 no. 2 (2002), 43–70; "The Cinematic Nature of the Opening Scene of Heliodoros' *Aithiopika*," *Ancient Narrative*, 1 (2000–2001), 161–184; "Apollonius and the Golden Fleece: A Neo-Mythological Screen Legacy," *Archai*, 22 (2018), 319–361; "Peckinpah and the Problem of Catharsis; or: How Well Does *The Wild Bunch* Fit Aristotle's *Poetics*?" in Sue Matheson (ed.), *The Good, The Bad and the Ancient: Essays on the Greco-Roman Influence in Westerns* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022), 66–82. Parts of Chapters 3 and 4 are based on "*Cinemetamorphosis*: Toward a Cinematic Theory of Classical Narrative," *Dionysus ex Machina*, 6 (2015), 216–238, and on the first chapter in *Classical Literature on Screen: Affinities of Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017; rpt. 2020). The range of dates indicates how long I have been thinking about this book. Additionally, there are some briefer connections to other publications of mine.

are likely to react in different ways to my choices. Those who believe that I have drawn my line at the right place will be few at best. But this kind of dilemma is in the nature of the subject I pursue. In general, I have adhered to the practice advocated for ancient rhetoricians: to persuade or convince by force of example. Less is not more. Consequently, I have preferred to err on the side of inclusion rather than concision, and I quote or adduce more material than may be strictly necessary. For instance, what various film directors (and others) have said about Homer or about the power of the close-up would carry little conviction if I had cited only a few. Such a procedure would be wholly insufficient to indicate Homer's persistent importance even to filmmakers who did not film the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Similarly, if on a larger scale, the scholarly background to the topics examined in some chapters, especially 2, 11, and 12, places films within the continuum of classical receptions. In this regard, Chapters 2 and 11 in particular complement each other: they systematically document the history of different and conflicting interpretations of, in one case, an image and, in the other, a text. These histories in turn are the basis for cinematic analyses. What some readers will consider an excess of details will, I hope, amount to greater persuasiveness for others. Mine is therefore an intellectual process that Eisenstein, my model and inspiration, has exemplified. His enthusiasm, which is in evidence throughout his extensive writings, is irresistibly infectious. Eisenstein's writings have recently been characterized in these terms:

> Reading Eisenstein can be daunting and intellectually bracing. The range of his learning and the ambition of his theoretical aims are both staggering (if not always entirely consistent), while his sheer enthusiasm for ideas comes through, even in translation, in an affective way that is quite consistent with his own theorizing. Further, the structure and style of his prose often reads like a cinematic montage sequence.[5]

As a result, Eisenstein is my *spiritus rector*.[6] Accordingly, my book presents, in a way, a kind of textual-philological montage sequence on static and cinematic images, although, I hope, not a daunting one.

In view of its inherent duality – cinema for classical scholars, antiquity for film scholars – my book contains various comments on the ancient

[5] Quoted from Matthew Solomon, "Sergei Eisenstein: Attractions/Montage/Animation," in Murray Pomerance and R. Barton Palmer (eds.), *Thinking in the Dark: Cinema, Theory, Practice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 77–88, at 77.

[6] As he was throughout my *Ovid on Screen: A Montage of Attractions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), where see especially 10–13, 24–30, 39–41, and 215–221.

cultures from directors, critics, and others who were not classically trained. What they said or wrote about the ancients was not necessarily *au courant* and may occasionally even be wrong. But my book is largely about the reception of antiquity, and in this regard the decisive factor is not whether something is true or false but how and why it arose and became influential. The variety, often conflicting, of interpretations of tragic catharsis and of what Aristotle called *hamartia*, both addressed in Chapter 12, is an example. The latter, generally understood as meaning "tragic flaw" in someone's character, is something quite different, as is indicated by Herodotus, i.e. long before Aristotle.[7] Still, a critical misperception such as this has in turn influenced subsequent works of literature and their screen versions. A case in point is Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), whose credit sequence is followed by a textual quotation about "the stamp of one defect" leading to "corruption / From that particular fault." This is followed by Olivier's voice-over: "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind." This indecision on Hamlet's part, however, identified as his character flaw and deduced from the text but not expressed in Shakespeare's words, is nonexistent.[8] Another, Roman, example, is the meaning of Virgil's *Aeneid* and the scholarly contests – intellectual battle lines, duels even – that have resulted.[9]

Altogether, then, readers' reasoned and reasonable dissent from any of my propositions or conclusions can only help stimulate further explorations of individual topics or the book's overall perspective. Such explorations I hope to initiate with these pages. After all, interpreting antiquity through the lens of cinematic modernity can grant us important insights into the complexity and depth of Greco-Roman visual and literary arts. I have previously advanced the terms – and concepts – of *classical film philology* and *cinemetamorphosis* as general descriptors.[10] This approach

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[7] Herodotus, *The Histories* 3.34–35.4 (the story of Cambyses shooting and killing Prexaspes' son), with Cambyses' *ên de hamartô* ("if I miss") at 35.2.

[8] Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.4.23–36; my partial quotations of lines 31 and 36 are according to Harold Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet* (The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd ser.; London: Methuen, 1982; several rpts.), 209–211. On this passage see the editor's eye-opening note (Jenkins, 448–449) on its literary background and Shakespeare's change.

[9] A convenient summary and retrospective, pro and con the "Harvard School," as it has come to be called, may be found in the various essays, not always unpolemical, collected in *The Classical World*, 111 no. 1 (2017). To this now add Hans-Peter Stahl, "Vergil Clearing Emperor Augustus' Access to the Kingship of Troy: *Aeneid*, Books II AND III," *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft*, n.s., 46 (2022), 135–187, especially the "Methodological Excursus" at 174–184.

[10] Respectively in my *Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo's New Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; rpt. 2011), 20–69 (chapter titled "A Certain Tendency in Classical Philology"), and *Ovid on Screen*, 3–23 ("Cinemetamorphosis").

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must be based on close familiarity with classical and cinematic sources across their respective histories. I adhere to the spirit of ancient authors from the eighth century BC (Homer) to the fourth century AD (Heliodorus) when I emphasize that classical philologists ought to consider the perspective advanced here (and previously) as useful and helpful in approaching their texts, just as they ought to consider all forms of moving-picture adaptations – variants of Frank Kermode's "accommodations" adduced in Chapter 1 – of classical narrative texts and images as integral to their intellectual responsibilities. The classical tradition and classical receptions, which began in Hellenistic Greece if not earlier, and classical scholarship, which began at that time as well, mutually reinforce each other. Rudolf Pfeiffer rightly spoke of a *philologia perennis*.[11] The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for film and media scholars who deal with classical myth, history, philosophy, or literature. What Irving Babbitt wrote well over a century ago in the preface to *The New Laokoon* still applies, even if Babbitt had classicism and neoclassicism vis-à-vis Romanticism in mind. These he approached from a comparative-literature perspective: "It should be the ambition of the student of comparative literature to make all attempts to define these movements in terms of one literature seem one-sided and ill-informed."[12]

Except in quotations from and references to publications by others, I use common Latinized transliterations of Greek personal names and titles of works. I also use spellings of Greek terms that are now common in English, such as *ecphrasis* and *catharsis*. I use more literal transliterations elsewhere, e.g. *ekplêktikon*. I write *Heracles* and *Ketos*, *Heron* but not *Hero*, and *Plato* and *Zeno* but not *Platon* or *Zenon*. Complete consistency is not advisable, anyway. Translations from sources not in English but quoted in English without attribution are my own.

I am indebted to Maria Cecília de Miranda Nogueira Coelho (*prima inter pares*) and to Frederick Ahl, Horst-Dieter Blume, and James Clauss for support and numerous helpful suggestions, information, and advice. Sonya Nevin sent a thoughtful reply to my query about a possible animation of Douris' dragon vase painting. Chiara Sulprizio informed me about a little-known animated *Odyssey*. Experienced archers Peter Kalt and Jim Perry gave me valuable pointers. Readers for Cambridge University Press saved me from some errors and infelicities, as did

[11] Rudolf Pfeiffer, *Philologia perennis* (Munich: Beck, 1961).
[12] Irving Babbitt, *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), xi. Lessing's *Laocoon* will appear in Chapters 2 and 4.

Jacqueline French, my careful and conscientious copyeditor. Michael Sharp, my editor, once again provided his customary support. An exclusive league of sophisticated banqueteers in Washington, DC, continues to furnish its members with more than intellectual sustenance. Jerry Murbach gave me access to his extensive collection of Hollywood images. Other illustrations are either in the public domain, taken from my own collection, or screen captures from films and appear in accordance with fair-use rules and regulations.

The dedication page indicates my greatest debt of all: to those among the ancients without whom this book could never have been conceived. They are, of course, not the only ones who have never failed to give me intellectual or emotional pleasure – and usually both.