



## Introduction

“The classical literatures provide us with prototypes of virtually all later narrative forms and with paradigms of the processes which govern their interaction and evolution.” So wrote, in 1966, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in their influential study *The Nature of Narrative*.<sup>1</sup> The statement may seem a truism but is worth our attention, both in regard to the prominence of studies in the classical tradition – or classical reception, as it is now called – and in connection with the wide range of narrative media in word and image, usually in combination. “The raw material of human existence remains ever the same, the molds by which it is given significance and recognizable shape are forever being recreated,” Scholes and Kellogg observed later on.<sup>2</sup> This, too, is an accurate if basic statement. But it is important because of a major shift in the way stories have come to be told.

### 1 Narrative from Text to Image

Verbal narratives – in Greece and Rome, an oral tradition that became the literature of epic, drama, historiography, and the novel – have by now yielded their primacy to visual narratives. Scholes and Kellogg were well aware of this change:

The most powerful influence on contemporary narrative art is not esthetic or even cultural in any broad sense . . . [There is now] a technological change which may leave a mark on the narrative tradition as profound as the invention of letters itself. We refer to the invention of the motion-picture film with its attendant devices of synchronous sound track and videotape, and with its flexible means of presentation in theater or home.<sup>3</sup>

At their time, Scholes and Kellogg could still call this a “glance in the direction of the future.”<sup>4</sup> Half a century later, that future has arrived. It is

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 2006: 57. Original edition: Scholes and Kellogg 1966. Phelan is the author of an additional chapter outlining narrative theory since the book’s original publication. I quote from the new edition but name only the authors of the quotations I adduce.

<sup>2</sup> Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 2006: 156. <sup>3</sup> Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 2006: 279–280.

<sup>4</sup> Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 2006: 279.

our present and even has begun to turn into our past. Videotape, for instance, which was looming on the horizon in 1966, is a dead technology in the twenty-first century.

Scholes and Kellogg next argue, correctly, for film as a form of narrative rather than dramatic art, especially regarding the importance of point of view for all narratives. An “acceleration of tradition,” they continue, “is an open invitation [to artists] in the field of cinema.” But those working on visual narratives only continue doing what literary artists have always done:

Whether the poet of the film plunders the older forms to feed his new medium . . . or simply allows this new technique to generate new kinds of story . . . , the new form offers open doors where the old has little left but mirrored walls . . . book and [stage] play are lambs co-existing with a lion cub that is just beginning to find its strength.

This strength they connect with the emergence of European art cinema that had begun around 1960. The films of Ingmar Bergman, Alain Resnais, and Michelangelo Antonioni, whom Scholes and Kellogg name, were decisive, among others, to convince even obstinate naysayers that the cinema was now the equal of all other art forms. (Similar debates had occurred during the silent era.) Cinema as art of visual narrative threatens to eclipse the art of written narrative: “The monuments of the past will remain, as Homeric epic remains, to remind us of a vanished literary medium . . . But the main impetus of narrative art may well pass from the book to the cinema, even as it passed from the oral poet to the book-writer long ago. Truly, all things flow.”<sup>5</sup>

This Heraclitean nature of narrative, at least in regard to classical narrative as it returns on our screens, is the *raison d'être* of the present book. Previously I advanced and applied a first theory of the study of classics and cinema: *classical film philology*.<sup>6</sup> Here I pursue a comparable approach to the ways in which the cinema has turned to classical antiquity throughout its history, but from a different perspective. I examine works by the poets of the film, as Scholes and Kellogg elegantly call the great cinema artists, and works by those who plunder: not so much older forms as ancient plots and characters. I can, of course, only pursue a small number of possible subjects, but I hope that these will illuminate, by force of example, the daunting amount of potential themes. Affinities with antiquity, and not only narrative

<sup>5</sup> The preceding quotations are from Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 2006: 281. Currie 2010 bears out such a perspective by prominently including filmic narrative in his analyses.

<sup>6</sup> Winkler 2009a: 57–69.

ones, are persistent in our culture, and nowhere more so than in the cinema and its later offspring, television and digital media. These visions and modernizations of the past may occasionally produce blurred or distorted images, but they may also offer new insights into well-known works. The chapters in this book contain examples of both kinds. Some deal with works that exhibit, whether intentionally or not, surprising affinities with classical models and enhance our appreciation of, even our sense of awe before, their complexity. Others examine productions that use or abuse antiquity for commercial or political purposes.

I use the term *affinity* rather than *adaptation* or any of its synonyms and terminological relatives. It encompasses all of the latter's varieties while also accommodating yet other reworkings, and it saves us from theoretical agonies over what exactly visual adaptations of literary texts are. Scholars have by now produced a veritable terminological jungle, in which the following growths, as it were, have been thriving: "translation, actualization, reading, critique, dialogization, cannibalization, transmutation, transfiguration, incarnation, transmogrification, transcoding, performance, signifying, rewriting, detournement."<sup>7</sup> Or, more succinctly but still rather nebulously: "Borrowing, Intersecting, and Transforming Sources."<sup>8</sup>

All such procedures are part and parcel of any reception of an earlier culture by a later one. Here the sensible words written by a formerly influential American educator are worth remembering. Almost a century ago John Erskine instituted the Great Books curriculum in higher education. In the opening essay of a collection titled *The Delight of Great Books*, which first appeared in 1928, Erskine came to the heart of the matter on his first page. The great and immortal authors, he maintained, "wrote to be read by the general public, and they assumed in their readers an experience of life and an interest in human nature, nothing more." Just previously Erskine had observed, with characteristic vividness, that "the men who wrote these books would have been horrified if they had known that you and I might think of them only as matter for school and college courses."<sup>9</sup> Erskine was also a popular novelist and a much sought-after public intellectual. He knew that general readers – and now viewers – are as important for literature as any kind of scholar or intellectual. A reader can become a writer; today, readers can easily become screenwriters or filmmakers. All things flow. Adaptations of any kind and on any level of quality are

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Stam 2005: 4 (in section titled "Beyond 'Fidelity'"). Cf. further MacCabe, Murray, and Warner 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Andrew 1984: 98 (title of a section in chapter "Adaptation").

<sup>9</sup> Erskine 1935b: 11.

therefore not only to be expected but also unavoidable. Erskine has sensible and humorous things to say about this aspect of great works later in his essay. He mentions a few representative examples of authors whose familiar and beloved creations were reworked by others: Homer by Virgil, Chaucer by Shakespeare, Shakespeare by Shaw, Malory by Tennyson, Malory and Tennyson by Edwin Arlington Robinson.<sup>10</sup>

If such creative reworkings of classical prototypes and paradigms, to quote Scholes and Kellogg's terms, occur on the highest level, how much more often will they occur in popular culture? Here are two revealing answers to this question, one classical and one modern. Roman epic poet Manilius said about Homer: "Posterity has led all the springs flowing from his mouth into its own poetry and so has dared to distribute [one] stream into [many] clear rivers, made fertile by one man's gifts."<sup>11</sup> All literature in the history of Western culture derives from Homer, regardless of the artistic or technological medium involved. Wolfgang Petersen, director of the epic film *Troy* (2004), once adduced another nature image to characterize Homer, the *Iliad*, and its tradition, to which his own film belongs: "If there is something like a tree of storytelling, on which each book, each film, is a tiny leaf, then Homer is its trunk."<sup>12</sup>

I have adduced Scholes and Kellogg and Erskine at some length to point out that my book is intended as a small contribution to a long flow of tradition. It is also part of an ongoing process that carries my studies of the presence of the classical cultures in our visual media into areas that have remained unexamined or mentioned only briefly. As before, I address specific mythical, historical, or mythic-historical aspects of classical literature and their reappearances on screen.

## 2 Tiresias' Memory: From Homer to Film Studies

The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, which I adduce in Chapter 2, may prompt at least some of my readers to ask, in the terms made familiar by Harold Bloom, whether there does not exist a certain anxiety of influence – a concept in principle applicable not only to poets but to artists in other creative media as well – between ancient authors and

<sup>10</sup> Erskine 1935b: 18–20.

<sup>11</sup> Manilius, *Astronomica* 2.8–11: *cuiusque ex ore profusos / omnis posteritas latices in carmina duxit / amnemque in tenuis ausa est deducere rivos / unius fecunda bonis*. Here and throughout, translations from non-English sources are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from Kniebe 2004.

their modern adaptors. This question may be too large for me to answer; it should be posed and answered in connection with specific modern works that exhibit affinities with specific classical models or precursors. Instead, I would here like to discuss one related but different sort of influence that seems to me both symptomatic and dangerous. It is the misleading, indeed false, influence deriving from a misinformed postulate of affinity. A particularly revealing example will illustrate what I have in mind. It also shows why classical philologists ought to engage in cinema studies.

Emigré Russian film scholar Mikhail Iampolski began a monograph on intertextuality and film with a famous episode of the *Odyssey* and accordingly called his book *The Memory of Tiresias*.<sup>13</sup> Why he should have chosen this title is of interest. On three of his four pages of "Introduction" Iampolski prominently discusses Tiresias, as readers would expect him to do. What he tells them, however, is something wholly unexpected for those who have come across Tiresias in classical literature. It is therefore necessary for me to quote Iampolski's take on Tiresias and his memory at some length.

Iampolski prepares his argument by introducing Mnemosyne, the divine personification of memory and the mother of the Muses. Her function is this:

Mnemosyne seems to draw the poet she endows with superior memory into another world, the world of oblivion and the past, identified with death. Lethe, the river of oblivion that flows through Hades, annihilates the memory of the deceased: indeed, it is this very act that renders them dead.<sup>14</sup>

To classical mythologists, the operative term here is *seems*. Mnemosyne was a daughter of the sky god Uranus and the earth goddess Gaia and thus a Titan goddess herself. Her association with the Underworld is far-fetched at best and seems to hinge on Hesiod's statement that Mnemosyne can provide forgetting (*lêmosynê*) of cares and rest from cares.<sup>15</sup> The statement about Lethe, the River of Forgetting, is unobjectionable, but the juxtaposition of Mnemosyne and Lethe is merely willful. On Iampolski's next page we meet Tiresias:

Among the prophets whose memory the gods preserved after their death, there is one, named Tiresias, who stands out. While still a young man Tiresias happened to sight the goddess Athena bathing in the fountain of Hippocrene. For this he was blinded but at the same time granted the gift of foresight. Later, while wandering

<sup>13</sup> Iampolski 1998. The original appeared in Russian in 1993. <sup>14</sup> Iampolski 1998: 1.

<sup>15</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 54–55.

along the slopes of Mount Cyllene he happened to see two snakes copulating and was turned into a woman for many years. The blind androgyne Tiresias was chosen by the gods to bear forever a memory that would not fade.<sup>16</sup>

The version of the myth in which Athena blinds Tiresias and then grants him the gift of understanding bird song – not quite the same as foresight – is attested.<sup>17</sup> But it is not the best-known one. That is the one on which Iampolski reports only in part. He omits Tiresias wounding or killing one of the snakes copulating and being turned into a woman and then, years later, again either wounding one of the same snakes copulating or killing one of another couple of snakes during their copulation and being turned back into a man. When Zeus and Hera call on him to tell them whether men or women receive greater pleasure from sexual intercourse, Tiresias, having the requisite experience, decides in favor of women. An angry Hera strikes him blind, a delighted Zeus grants him second sight.<sup>18</sup>

But this is not the worst misinformation. Nowhere in ancient sources is Tiresias an androgyne: simultaneously male and female. Rather, the story of the snakes and Zeus and Hera's quarrel works only if Tiresias is first of the one and then of the other sex. Forgetting this logical point, Iampolski instead blindly follows modern poetry. Perhaps best known is T. S. Eliot's Tiresias from "The Fire Sermon" in *The Waste Land*. Here are the lines in question:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts . . . .  
 I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs . . . .  
 (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
 Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
 I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
 And walked among the lowest of the dead.)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Iampolski 1998: 2.

<sup>17</sup> Pherecydes in Apollodorus, *Library* 3.6.7; Callimachus, *Hymn to Athena – Bath of Pallas* 57–131. Frazer 1921: 361–367 collects the references and discusses the myth's variants in the ancient sources. On Callimachus' hymn see now Stephens 2015: 233–262.

<sup>18</sup> Hesiod, *Melampodia*, Fragment 275 (Merkelbach-West) = 211a–b (Most); easily accessible in Most 2007: 286–289 (Greek and English). The source of the fragment is an ancient commentary (*scholion*) on Homer, *Odyssey* 10.494. The ancient Greek and Latin texts concerning Tiresias are conveniently collected and translated (into French) in Brisson 1976; the book also contains iconographic information. Readers need not be structuralists to profit from Brisson's study. See now also Torres 2014. The *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, 8 Suppl., 1188–1191 (s. v. "Teiresias"), shows no image of either a female or a hermaphroditic Tiresias.

<sup>19</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*: III. "The Fire Sermon" 218–219, 228, and 243–246; quoted from Rainey 2005: 64.

In his note on line 218 Eliot quotes, *in toto*, Ovid's retelling of Tiresias, the snakes, and the gods' quarrel.<sup>20</sup> Eliot observes:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character," is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest . . . all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem. The whole passage from Ovid is of great anthropological interest.

Eliot did not impute androgyny to Ovid's Tiresias. It seems likely that he took this feature from Guillaume Apollinaire's play *The Breasts of Tiresias*. A feminist scholar explains:

The breasts of Tiresias had made a slightly earlier and even more startling appearance in Guillaume Apollinaire's surrealist play of that name, begun in 1903 but not staged until 1917 – a play that Eliot, with his interest in French avant-garde literature, must almost surely have known.<sup>21</sup>

Iampolski's statement that Tiresias possessed an unfailing memory, however, is on firmer ground. Circe tells Odysseus that Persephone, the queen of the Underworld, had granted only Tiresias the powers of thought and awareness after his death.<sup>22</sup>

But what about Tiresias' memory? Since he is a prophet, the future, not the past, is more important for Tiresias as indeed it is for Odysseus, whose sole reason to descend to the realm of the dead is to obtain information about his return – not to be reminded of something that already occurred. So Iampolski tells us next:

The blind Tiresias would later meet Odysseus in the underworld. Recognizing Odysseus, Tiresias foretells his future. Alongside the seer Odysseus encounters his own mother, who sees him but fails to recognize him. The blind man, it turns out, can see better, for his blindness has retained the past and its images in the dark. To recognize is to place what you see alongside what you know, alongside what has already been. Odysseus's mother, bereft of her memory, cannot "see" her son. Sight without memory is blind.<sup>23</sup>

Only the first two sentences above are correct. Yes, Odysseus encounters the shade of his mother, but he encounters quite a number of other shades

<sup>20</sup> Eliot quotes Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.320–338 in Latin. The following quotation is from Rainey 2005: 72–73.

<sup>21</sup> Garber 2000: 158 (in chapter titled "The Secret of Tiresias"). Garber's book first appeared as Garber 1995. Iampolski 1998: 3 has a few things to say about Apollinaire and Eliot.

<sup>22</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 10.492–495. Heubeck, in Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989: 69, gives a concise explanation.

<sup>23</sup> Iampolski 1998: 2.

as well and converses with them.<sup>24</sup> It is wrong to assert that Anticleia does not recognize her son or that she preserves no memory either of him or of her own life. On the contrary, mother and son have a moving encounter, and Anticleia explains to Odysseus the kind of existence the shades are leading and reveals that she had died of grief over his long absence from home. The reunion of dead mother and living son extends over more than seventy lines.<sup>25</sup> It is even longer than Odysseus' meeting with Tiresias, which immediately preceded it.<sup>26</sup> Iampolski neglects to inform his readers about the importance of the blood of sacrificial animals, which the shades drink. Homer's Tiresias, but not Iampolski's, explains this to Odysseus. Here are the decisive lines in their exchange. Tiresias to Odysseus:

Now draw back from the pit, and hold your sharp sword away from me,  
 so that I can drink from the blood and speak the truth to you.

Odysseus to Tiresias:

I see before me now the soul of my perished mother,  
 but she sits beside the blood in silence, and has not yet deigned  
 to look directly at her own son and speak a word to me.  
 Tell me, lord, what will make her know me, and know my presence?

Tiresias' reply:

Easily I will tell you and put it in your understanding.  
 Any one of the perished dead you allow to come up  
 to the blood will give you a true answer, but if you begrudge this  
 to any one, he will return to the place where he came from.

The result, as Odysseus states, is in accordance with this: "I / waited steadily where I was standing, until my mother / came and drank the dark-gurgling blood, and at once she knew me."<sup>27</sup>

Odysseus' mother, then, is *not* bereft of her memory and *can* see her son. And what about Tiresias, whose memory, Iampolski says, has retained the past? Tiresias provides Odysseus with only one piece of information about the past; everything else he tells him is about the future.<sup>28</sup> The past is not

<sup>24</sup> Altogether, Odysseus meets twenty-six shades (*Odyssey* 11.51–332 and 385–630): his companion Elpenor, Tiresias, Anticleia; fourteen heroines; three heroes from the Trojan War (Agamemnon, Achilles, Ajax); and six heroes from a more distant past.

<sup>25</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 11.152–225. <sup>26</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 11.90–151.

<sup>27</sup> The preceding quotations are Homer, *Odyssey* 11.95–96, 141–144, 146–149, and 151–153; quoted from Lattimore 1967: 170–172. See further Heubeck in Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989: 80–81 (on *Odyssey* 11.51–54) and 86 (on 11.144–149).

<sup>28</sup> Tiresias mentions the reason why Poseidon is persecuting Odysseus (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.101–103).



the point when we consult a prophet or seer (unless we are Oedipus); the future is. And that is what prophets usually tell us about, for they “speak ahead,” as the very term *pro-phet* (from Greek *prophētēs*) tells us. More importantly, Iampolski does not consider Circe, the sorceress and prophetess who gives Odysseus information and sends him to meet Tiresias: “What Tiresias tells Odysseus could equally well have been relayed by Circe.”<sup>29</sup>

Has Iampolski actually read Homer? If so, he has seriously misunderstood him. The result is predictable in its vagueness and assertion by authorial fiat:

Vision, sight, seeing, and looking are all concepts connected with spectacle. Many texts confront us culturally as mobile pictures. In the twentieth century, cinema has come to embody this cultural tendency to cultivate spectacle. But the story Homer tells us also serves to remind us that seeing without remembering means not understanding. The memory of Tiresias turns out to be a better spectator than the clouded gaze of Odysseus's mother. A spectacle that is not immersed in memory, that has not been granted access to the sources of Mnemosyne, remains a meaningless collection of disjointed fragments. The memory of culture, the memory of Tiresias must be linked up to the individual text for the desired “union of beginning and end” to take place and for history to emerge.<sup>30</sup>

At least as far as its Homeric aspects are concerned, the preceding carries not a shred of conviction. The rest is obfuscation. So we may be forgiven if we dissent from Iampolski's conclusion: “The blind androgyne Tiresias has come out of antiquity to our own time.”<sup>31</sup> The concluding paragraph in Iampolski's introduction is then intended to justify all the heavy weather about Homer and Tiresias. I quote it without further comment:

The memory of Tiresias gives us our bearings; it is the guiding thread that keeps us, however illusory its effects may be, from losing ourselves in the chaos of texts and the chaos of being . . . The memory of Tiresias, it seems to me, might well serve as a symbol for cultural theory today, which is also called upon to unite, juxtapose, and make sense of things.<sup>32</sup>

To look to the Homeric epics for a foundation, or foundational symbol, of cultural theory is laudable. But Homer's Tiresias hardly fits the bill. On the last text page of his book Iampolski asserts, with the finality of one speaking *ex cathedra*: “The memory of the blind man – Tiresias – becomes the sign,

<sup>29</sup> Heubeck in Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989: 76. <sup>30</sup> Iampolski 1998: 2.

<sup>31</sup> Iampolski 1998: 3. The sentence is followed by mentions of Apollinaire and Eliot.

<sup>32</sup> Iampolski 1998: 4.

as it were, of intertextuality.”<sup>33</sup> We know that it does not and cannot become such a sign. But we may realize something else. Are not the memory and the cleverness of Odysseus, who is not only an accomplished narrator and rhetorical strategist but also a hero who does not lose himself in the chaos of texts or being, far more suitable to provide Iampolski with his bearings on his own journey through intertextuality and cinema? Odysseus’ mother virtually makes the point when she observes to him: “All this is hard for the living to look on.”<sup>34</sup> Odysseus looks, understands, and later tells about it. In Iampolski’s words, he makes sense of things. Moreover, Odysseus’ descent to the Underworld is itself a miracle of intertextuality, although perhaps not of the kind Iampolski has in mind: “Consideration of the episode as a whole leads . . . to the conclusion that the poet has succeeded admirably in combining motifs from religious practice, folk-tale and saga, and subordinating each to the overall concept of the poem.”<sup>35</sup>

My goal with the preceding was not to show up Iampolski as an ignoramus about antiquity or to set him up as a convenient straw man to be knocked down. Rather, Iampolski’s misguided discussion of Tiresias provides me with a revealing justification for my book. *The Memory of Tiresias* has been extremely well received by film scholars; one of them has even listed it second among his choice of the five most inspirational books on cinema ever written. His reason is this:

a dazzling demonstration of how, when, where and why films quote other films (and other media) and why we should care. A book so far ahead of its time we haven’t caught up with it.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Iampolski 1998: 253. This is the last page of his “Conclusion” (245–253), followed by endnotes and back matter. He quotes (235) from Apollodorus that Athena granted Tiresias the power to understand the sounds of birds and gave him a staff to walk with. Iampolski’s context is a “series of sketches on the theme of blindness” (234) by Sergei Eisenstein; they include a *Belisarius* and a *Tiresias* of 1941 and 1944. “Both depict blind men of antiquity” (234), which is not strictly true. The story of the historical Belisarius’ blindness is a medieval legend that became popular in literature and painting. Iampolski mentions a few of the latter (234). Tiresias appears again when Iampolski deals with modern intertextual theories and Eisenstein (242): “For Eisenstein, text and intertext could not be correlated unless an invisible text could be extrapolated from them, which could then bring their correlation into effect . . . For Eisenstein this [i.e. “a structural invariable,” after Michael Riffaterre] becomes a ‘third text,’ a speculative, almost mystical interpretant, existing in the Platonic sphere of pure ideas, which only the blind Tiresias is able to divine.” All clear?

<sup>34</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 11.156; quoted from Lattimore 1967: 172.

<sup>35</sup> Heubeck in Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989: 76–77.

<sup>36</sup> Australian critic Adrian Martin, quoted from James 2010: 24. He had earlier called Iampolski’s book “the most significant text in the field of film studies over the past fifteen years” (Adrian Martin 2008: 61).