Coda: Classics, Contingency, and the Future of Cinematic Heroism

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About twenty years ago, I found myself involved in an academic discussion about the future of ancient history on film. I was in the middle of completing my PhD thesis on the cinematic reception of Rome and its emperors.[1] Hardly surprisingly, everybody seemed to assume that I was going to locate us within a new 'third era' of classical epic films, similar to the heyday of early productions until the 1930s and the golden days of the 1950s/1960s. The auspices looked good: *Troy* was a major success at the box office; *Gladiator* still sold well on the secondary market; *Rome* was about to become the most expensively produced TV series ever. My answer – which I put into writing the same evening to test its worth as an academic time capsule – seemed to disappoint my colleagues. I suggested that the whole idea of a third 'blockbuster wave' should be taken with more than just a pinch of salt, because it seriously underestimated the presence of classical antiquity in basically all other forms of film. To start with, the ancient narratives, heroes and cultures had never been absent from the medium as such. In fact, the alleged drought between the 1970s and 1990s gave us hundreds of biblical TV movies, not so biblical independent films, animated edutainment features for children on Greek myth and history, entire series of pornographic films set in ancient Rome or Egypt and many more. Two of the longest running and most successful TV productions of that era – *Hercules* and *Xena* – stem from the 1990s.[2] What *Gladiator* did was to return imperial Rome to the status of Academy Award candidate, then Oscar winner, and subsequently reintroduce the subject into the machinery of blockbuster hypes. This impact, I conceded, might be able to spur on and carry similar projects over a couple of years. Essentially, however, we would have to realize that our focus was distorted, and that we should get ready for a larger variety of narratives, heroes and cinematic presentations.

In hindsight, I still find it difficult to understand how easily a film like *300* nevertheless became subsumed under the same categories as *Gladiator*. While there are certainly general issues with *300*, many of which originate in the fact that people tend to overlook the framework story that contextualizes the main narrative as Spartan propaganda, few people even bothered to understand how different the mechanics of a comic book adaptation are from other epic films.

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[1] Published two years after the event as Martin Lindner: Rom und seine Kaiser im Historienfilm, Frankfurt am Main 2007.

[2] A new exhaustive volume on the subject edited by Amanda Potter and Anise K. Strong is about to be published by Bloomsbury as part of the *Imagines* book series.

That Frank Miller's graphic novel is a particularly difficult case for other reasons as well hardly mattered by comparison.[3]

Largely ignored by scholarship, the following years brought us even more atypical films and heroes: *The Last Eve* adapted the biblical story with the filmic language of Korean (action) cinema. *Centurion* retold the plot and aesthetics of the horror movie *Dog Soldiers* in a 2nd century AD setting. Time-travelling series from *Adventurers* to *Dr Who* and *The Librarians* frequently included visits to the ancient world. The much-overlooked field of documentaries would yield even more diverse results – I invite you to look up *Hannibal: Rome's Worst Nightmare* or the 'scripted reality' format *Chasing Mummies*. All of these examples came with narrative rules and traditions so far unfamiliar to the 'classical' *peplum* film. One may observe that *Gladiator* is marginally more historical than *Dr Who*, if only for the fact that the former did not include a time-travelling police call box. It is just that such an observation is not particularly helpful unless followed by an informed analysis and explanation.

Truth be told, one might have started to think about these issues decades ago, as some people in academia did. Ruth Lindner (no familial relation to myself) realized that Oliver Stone's *Alexander* included a variety of elements that had to be explained in the light of the director's and writer's artistic history.[4] Once you know what to look for, it is easy to recognize the connections to the Vietnam films and Stone's own *Platoon* in particular, but even more so to *The Doors*, Stone's biography of rock star Jim Morrison. I would not go so far as to proclaim that *Alexander* is just a variation of the same story, but the corrupting influence of power and/or admiration certainly is a recurring leitmotif. The same could be said for Stone's fondness for psychedelic imagery and camera effects. Before we complain that Stone is not Arrian or Plutarch, we should consider what he does instead, for whom and why. Not every study of the film has to consider the above-mentioned leitmotif, as proven by Nils Steffensen, who has simply chosen a different focus for his contribution to this volume. Still, he would never have managed a useful result had he restricted himself to a positivistic comparison and set out to protect the historical truth (whatever that may be in the case of Alexander legends).

My point was then as it is now: we as a community of scholars – and predominantly Western scholars – have or somehow assume a certain familiarity with classical heroes, stories, and images. We accept these as universal cornerstones

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[3]   Without claiming completeness, my last count of essays, book chapters and extensive treatments in monographs written by Classical scholars on *300* is in the high two digits. I will not be pointing out individual cases, because the issues described above seem to be a problem gradually present in the majority of them. It is, however, noteworthy how long after its release these publications are still coming in. Such an impact of a modern film is quite unusual and probably only superseded by that of *Gladiator*.

[4]   Ruth Lindner: Mythos Alexander, in: Martin Lindner (ed.): Drehbuch Geschichte. Die antike Welt im Film (Antike Kultur und Geschichte 7), Münster 2005, pp. 50–66.

and project our acceptance – often unaware of the fact and silently excluding anything outside this scope – onto an ever-growing world of receptions that is actually far more diverse. One might even argue that while classical epic films may be seen as a conservative genre, this holds true for any kind of blockbuster production which has been seeking to repeat a winning formula since film studios were born.[5] The duty of any scholar is not to predetermine his or her results by using a biased sample. For every conservative film on ancient Egypt there is a *Bubba Ho-Tep*, for every traditional history series a parody like *Plebs*, for every old-fashioned *The Legend of Hercules* a slightly more progressive Dwayne Johnson *Hercules*. It would also be unfair to claim this as an entirely new development. If you have ever watched the 1923 silent movie *The Three Ages* or George Bernard Shaw's 1945 *Caesar and Cleopatra*, you will know that films which purposefully show an alternative narrative to the mainstream have been around for a very long time.[6] What has changed in recent years are two external factors: availability and interconnectedness. Never before has it been so easy to access films as well as information on them. If you wish to check right now how the two previously mentioned Hercules movies differ from each other, both of them are available on several streaming services. You can read a scholarly analysis like the one by Luis Unceta Gómez in this volume, but you do not have to if you are just looking for the cliff notes: countless websites offer comparisons, identify the mythological background, add more or less professional reviews etc. The resources are so immense and so easily at hand that we tend to overlook, or even actively eliminate, any examples that have not made it into this canon, which is the undeserved destiny of most pre-World War II films.

The increasingly interconnected nature of our modern world means that there are more diverse influences in media, offering a chance for films to connect to other audiences and additional markets. If you made a film like *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* in Malaysia half a century ago, rarely anyone outside of the country would have noticed. In the 2010s, the film was able to find an audience in Europe and the Americas that was particularly interested (and often well-versed in) Eastern Asian cinema and its characteristic hero narratives. These recipients in turn had the technical means to exchange comments on the final result as well as stories of its production, with large parts of this discourse then visible for everyone on social media. How exactly could this have affected the film and

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[5]   Dissected decades ago as "narrative machinery" by David Bordwell: Narration in the Fiction Film, Madison 1985. On the studio system and its preferences for established formulas see (among others) Thomas Schatz: The Genius of the System. Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era, Minneapolis 2010; David Bordwell et al.: The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960, London 2015.

[6]   Cf. Maria Wyke: Silent Laughter and the Counter-historical. Buster Keaton's *Three Ages* (1923), in: Panteilis Michelakis / Maria Wyke (ed.): The Ancient World in Silent Cinema, Cambridge 2013, pp. 275–296; Diana Wenzel: Von kindlichen und komischen Kleopatras, in: Martin Lindner (ed.): Drehbuch Geschichte. Die antike Welt im Film (Antike Kultur und Geschichte 7), Münster 2005, pp. 124–136.

its heroes? It is notoriously difficult to pinpoint any aspect of a cinema production to the individual motivation and act of one crew member or another single factor. Nevertheless, we can assume that the people involved in making *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* were approaching the project with an awareness of the realities of a highly interconnected world. After all, the film was ready in an international release version for the United Kingdom shortly after it hit cinemas in Malaysia and its neighbouring countries. One might also expand the question of interconnectedness to different media, as Alexander Vandewalle has done in his contribution to this volume. To understand any film, you have to look at more than just the film itself. And this is where we finally reach the point to ask questions concerning classical heroes and their future in 21st century film.

What can we expect from future examples and their leading classical main characters? That depends on what we are willing and able to do to follow new paths, not merely when dealing with recently produced films, but also when searching for new ways of thinking about older ones. This is precisely why we chose the essay format for this volume: Martin Winkler demonstrates in his contribution how looking forward without looking back comes close to cultural amnesia. The modern heroes stand on the shoulders of those from a long filmic tradition and continue to be influenced by them. There are of course some new aspects to modern portrayals of classical heroes, but far fewer than one might expect when one is aware of their predecessors. The 'strong men' aesthetics retraced by Torsten Caeners are a particularly striking example for such power of tradition. Georg Eckert shows us the value of a clearly defined set of analytical tools without which any treatment of any filmic reception tends to become just another retelling of the obvious. On this basis, Silvester Kreisel achieves new results on one of the most frequently analyzed films by asking new and more precise questions. Anastasia Bakogianni discusses fragmented and sinister (anti-) heroic narratives, but her results take us further than a mere case study. They lead us to think about the social, political, and psychological impact of hero narratives in general. Since many of us do not only research but also teach (ancient) history, we have to understand better how we see and use film in these very different roles, as Wolfgang Hochbruck and his colleagues outline in their chapter. Krešimir Matijević gave us a lively interpretation of Marc Antony on screen (with a special focus on the TV series *Rome*) during the initial workshop – and has developed it into a more reflective analysis in this book.

We can only encourage the continuation of this debate as we have done in the transition from the original workshop to our essay collection. Not every film will be rewarding in terms of a complex hero narrative, at least if recent entries are anything to go by. Despite some technological advancements and a few innovative choices in the film's music, Timur Bekmambetow's 2016 *Ben Hur* and its eponymous hero are even more stereotypical than the 1925 Fred Niblo version or the 1959 William Wyler adaptation. However, the examples listed above demonstrate how a deeper knowledge of context and criteria allows us

to better understand the gradation of what we identify as heroism. Many of us have been socialized with European-American cinema, and some expressions of patriotism, variations of gender roles, and stylized or animalistic brutality in other traditions may irritate us. On second thought, however, they may be particularly fitting for the definition of a hero in another cinematic culture. It is very likely that we will see an even bigger divide in times to come: on the one hand, an increasing number of 'woke' and/or self-ironic heroes (as well as a blurring between sinister hero narratives and anti-hero narratives); on the other, more cases of vehement reinforcement of traditional models. These general trends will probably be more stable than the usage and position of any single hero within them. As I write these lines, the latest Marvel blockbuster *Thor: Love and Thunder* used a post-credits scene to hint at an upcoming role for Hercules as Zeus's hitman.[7] Apparently, we have come a long way from the times of Steve Reeves… We may even see an increase in the number of different heroes chosen, although it remains doubtful if we will ever return to the diversity of the early silent film era.

Beyond these kinds of prophecies and speculations, it might be helpful to readdress the initial question and ask ourselves what we can expect from any current and future entries to the list of cinematic classical heroes *for the field of Classics*. If we look at older research, mentions of a historical interpretation in, say, Shakespearean drama were not unusual.[8] Why exactly should we accept this and condemn other media? We made our peace with film as a teaching tool in schools long ago, provided that it was combined with a critical analysis of the historical facts. Then again, what medium could ever be considered exempt from the basic rules of academic scrutiny? The important question we should ask ourselves is why we seem to be warier of films than of dramas or novels. Furthermore, a certain amount of film terminology has been engrained in our everyday language from 'shifting the focus' to 'crossfading', from 'backdrops' to 'close-ups'. When we use these terms even in our scholarly research, however, this is more a sign of a general cultural influence, not an intentional transfer of terminology and methodology. Yet the latter – and media theory in general – deserves more attention than we seem currently willing to give it.

Allow me to invite you to participate in a thought experiment: think about a Roman triumph as a demonstration of military prowess, Roman superiority, and, of course, heroism. As a scholar, you can list the participants, describe the route and the practical details, name historical contexts and analogies – but all of this will only give you part of an explanation. Now think about the people involved as if they were cameramen and -women. Their placement is not random, and

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[7]   Thor – Love and Thunder, USA 2022. Regie: Taika Waititi, 01:50:05–01:51:13 (single Blu-ray edition, GTIN: 8717418610975).

[8]   Or more if you think of the great Scottish classicist Lewis Campbell and his 230-page monograph on Tragic Drama in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare. An Essay, London 1904.

the same goes for the axes of sight and the available areas of visibility. The whole event is designed in a way that a general on the chariot will see a different (part of the) triumph than a soldier marching in the ranks, and a different one than a senate member, or a spectator in the crowd and so on. The complete picture is not just made up of the combination of angles, but also through the dynamic change of the event, with roles and positions limited by a framework known to everyone. Think about the panopticon of perspectives of the quasi-godly hero at the focus of this event produced by all of the different cameras. Then think about the role of a film editor reducing all available recordings in the cutting room to one master narrative – and finally, think about your own role as a scholar selecting your material when writing a text on the Roman triumph.

I do not mean to create a simplistic analogy. There are still a lot of differences between film cutters and classicists, starting with the option to recall the crew to the set to rerecord a failed scene. One might also mention the reality of modern film-making in which the world often consists of a green screen onto which computer-generated imagery is added later on. So, if it makes it easier for you, compare the historical event you discuss to an unrepeatable non-CGI mass recording like in *Fall of the Roman Empire* or the 1963 *Cleopatra*. (Or develop a certain cynicism and compare the influence of reviewers and editors at later stages of a manuscript to the modifications done by CGI artists after the first test screenings.) All things considered, however, I still believe that film as a medium is so familiar to us that it would be short-sighted not to use our experience and observations from dealing with it if this can help us gain new perspectives on our classical sources. The organized performance of heroism is one such area. We know how films use visual tropes or music for it, how they combine and reframe different perspectives into a master narrative, how they react to complexity with overwhelming simplification etc. In addition, the cinema industry is probably the best demonstration of the power and mechanics of 'star cult', whose impact reaches far beyond the medium itself. Or we might look at films to understand how heroic visuals can become outdated in history as they do on screen.

All this is in addition to any individual impulse which you may gain from a single interpretation provided by a specific film of a specific character or event shown in it. As you may have read in Krešimir Matijević's contribution, the series *Rome* frequently diverts from classical sources, even where the latter would – in my own subjective view – have resulted in a more entertaining narrative. On the other hand, *Rome* was an eye-opener for many people who were asking themselves how Octavian became the (sometimes not so) great Augustus. Furthermore, the series illustrated how ill-advised a concentration merely on the male protagonists in this dynamic period of history would be, and even in some recent scholarly publications still is. Nobody is asking you to accept *Rome*'s storyline that Caesarion is not Caesar's biological son or that he escaped his own execution. The final season ended before Caesarion could have developed into a fully-fledged fictional hero or anti-hero, so we are free to imagine his future as we

please. Apart from the entertaining value of such thought experiments, we could also see them as an opportunity to rethink our assumptions. How sure can we be in most cases about the actual biological fatherhood of our historical heroes and anti-heroes? How important is the point in ancient thinking anyway, e. g. compared to publicly declared and accepted fatherhood? Films have also been teaching us narrative rules for over a century now: everybody knows that any villain supposedly dying off-screen has a good chance of turning up alive at a later point. Why should we assume that a similar awareness was not one of the motivations behind holding public executions (and the often drastic way they were performed) in the ancient world?

My point is not that we should interpret every part of ancient history by look- ing for a film analogy, but to be clear about some basic concepts regarding the medium and its impact: firstly, we are 'moving picture people', and probably were so before film strengthened the effect. When we see an image of a ship inclined in the water and spot the name "Titanic", we immediately run our inner film of the 1912 catastrophe.[9] We may even claim that this *is* the sinking of the Titanic, even if strictly speaking all we have is a piece of paper with a printed depiction of a ship inclined in the water. Everything else is the internal film we direct in our mind. We think in – often visual – narratives, and we tend to make meaning by superimposing them onto fragments of information. This is not necessarily a bad thing (just ponder the didactic possibilities), and not everybody associating the term "Colosseum" with the movie *Gladiator* is automatically and irredeem- ably lost to historical criticism. Why should we not use this effect, and even reveal its paradoxes in a non-patronizing way to encourage critical reflection? When I showed high school students a still from *Hercules* (2014), they could immediately tell me that it depicted an ancient hero killing a beast and avenging its victims. In fact, it did not. The picture showed actor Dwayne Johnson in his role as Hercules, standing on a pile of bones, holding a bow in the presence of the very much alive Nemean Lion. Few of the students had seen the film at that time. However, they had been taught the myth of the Twelve Labours the week before, associated the narrative context and remembered the outcome. Furthermore, they were familiar with Dwayne Johnson and his traditional roles as action film hero, so they superimposed motives – justified revenge and/or protection from future harm as heroic deeds – on the scene. I could have chosen to point out to these students where exactly they were wrong. What I did instead was to use this creative step from image to story to discuss the dynamics of myth-making. Reception is an integral part of our life and of classical studies, whether we want it or not, which makes it all the more futile to treat it as a separate phenomenon.

Secondly, we have learned through and from films how important the exist- ence and build-up of a hero and/or an anti-hero is – or why we ought to be

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9   As demonstrated by Horace Porter Abbott: The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative, Cam- bridge 2002, 1–24.

careful about any hero too polished to be real. The most memorable (and usually also the most successful) films are the ones that allow their positive heroes at least some twist or dark side. If Oliver Stone had decided to portray Alexander like a 1960s *peplum* hero, the complexity of *Alexander*'s message would have fallen apart. In *Rome*, Polly Walker is so effective in her role as Atia because she makes the conflicting motives of her character believable and entertaining: a caring, but also hurtful mother, a loyal, but misguided lover, etc. The classical heroic narratives are more interesting when they are not one-dimensional, so why should this not be the case within antiquity itself? So before you claim that, for example, the imperial biographies of Suetonius were read in ancient Rome for their superficial 'shock values', consider that the above-mentioned mechanism might explain another kind of attraction. In all likelihood, the current fascination with "broken heroes" identified by Anastasia Bakogianni is going to bring us more examples and thus opportunities to study this effect.

Thirdly, any historical interpretation is a creative activity. We attempt to explain Julius Caesar's political strategies, and in the process ask ourselves countless 'what if' questions: what would have been the alternative to his *clementia* approach? Could he have stopped the inner political escalation leading to his assassination? Such deliberations may still lead to a compelling heroic narrative of Caesar as created by Theodor Mommsen in his Nobel prize-winning *History of Rome*. So why should we admire such an influential piece of scholarship and deny a film – or ourselves – the right to tap into this powerful narrative arsenal? We do not have to feel guilty or defend ourselves when a film inspires or provokes us. Our duty as scholars is to channel the creative input of our own mind and others through the scientific method with as much transparency and objectiveness as possible. Nevertheless, the result will, to a certain extent, be another story itself. Trying to ignore or downplay that fact will help neither us nor our argument. Maybe we sometimes even need films to remind us of that.

Fourthly, at least part of our discipline tends to be rather conservative. This may not be how we think of ourselves, and classicists usually find it difficult to understand why a focus on the past should be a bad thing anyway. Focusing on the past is not the same as being backwards, but instead a job requirement in our line of work. We love learning more about antiquity, and we are rightfully proud of our discipline's scholarly tradition and achievements. We may even acknowledge that our profession asks for a high level of 'entry knowledge': if you wish to formulate a qualified judgement of a contract from Ptolemaic Egypt, you need at least one ancient language, basic skills in paleography and papyrology, a decent grasp of the history of law and of Hellenistic Egypt etc. If you belong to the informed circle of people possessing such qualifications, it is easy to forget the consequences of the circle's exclusivity and its limitations. This is true for our own cultural context, but even more so on a larger scale. We may frown at the artistic quality and historical inaccuracies of a film like the Chinese 天將雄師 (internationally released as *Dragon Blade*). However, such cinematic receptions

remind us that cultural appropriation and tendencies to redefine ancient history and its heroes are not necessarily limited to the Western world. In fact, the connection imagined in 天將雄師 between early Imperial Rome and Han China can warn us how often we tend to blank out some parts of the world – and how little we know of the issues, values, and questions that make people there interested in classical antiquity. Even if we can identify parallels to our mechanisms of hero worship in 天將雄師 and others, such films should make us aware that even very different paths can cross at some point (and thus make the event all the more worth exploring).

Fifthly, we are in the middle of a massive transition which is redefining the way we acquire and judge information. Linear transmission – newspapers, books, television, cinemas – is in decline. We consume our films on streaming services, perhaps while simultaneously writing about the experience on social media. Traditional multiplicators of information have to either (1) adapt to some of these dynamics or (2) present themselves as charmingly anachronistic and stylish or (3) emphasize a specific quality to the extreme. Number one is why online newspapers now include comment sections, number two why some cinemas have started to bring old-fashioned lounges back, and number three why studios seek their fortune in ever more overwhelming blockbuster films. When video games finally replace film as the better illusion of a window into the 'real/historical past', the heroic narratives predominant in both media may well drift further apart than they are now. Maybe video game heroes will become more hyper-realistic in the process, while film heroes reapproximate heroes as shown on today's theatre stages? Ten years ago, nobody could have imagined that a crowdfunding project could lead to an impressive and sometimes even innovative Jesus Christ film series. Today, we have *The Chosen*, and in it, you can witness the very tendency mentioned above: not the attempt of older 'classical' Jesus films to repeat the well-known formula, only on a more spectacular scale, but a decidedly different narration with a need for a different build-up of heroes and anti-heroes. Admittedly, some of the series' motivations, dialogue and PR claims remain decidedly conservative. Then again, *The Chosen* and its strategy of 'underwhelming' (in my view: chosen to achieve a connection to its viewers on a different level than its predecessors) points towards a repositioning of the medium. The ancient world and its heroes are familiar, yet at the same time alien to us. If you wish to see one of the areas in which this relationship will be most dynamically redefined, keep an eye out for the classical heroes on the big and small screens.