From Antiquity to the Present and Back

Reciprocal Influences between Heroes and Superheroes[*]

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Abstract

This paper explores the interactions between the characteristic traits and narrative template of the figure of the classical hero, and those of the archetype of the superhero. The kind of mutual influence that operates in the process of reception of classical heroes in contemporary mass media has spread from comics to movies, through the filmic adaptations of superhero comics, and has shaped modern renditions of mythical figures, such as Brett Ratner's *Hercules* (2014), which is discussed here as a case study.

Introduction: From Hero to Superhero (and Back)

It is well known that the superhero archetype, first appearing in the 1930s, is rooted in classical models of the hero.[1] A good number of studies have looked into this connection,[2] and some creators, aware of this lineage, have even actively explored it. Jack Kirby, for example, imposed a clearly myth-like narrative to his creations, and introduced certain ancient mythological figures to his work, including Hercules. Grant Morrison meanwhile gave the title *Supergods* to his personal history of the superhero genre.[3]

[1] See Stefan Tilg / Ralf von den Hoff: Homeric Heroes, in: Compendium heroicum, 2022. DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/homhe1.0.20220921.

[2] See, among others, Richard Reynolds: Super Heroes. A Modern Mythology, Jackson, MS 1992; Chris Mackie: Men of Darkness, in: Wendy Haslem et al. (eds.): Super/Heroes. From Hercules to Superman, Washington 2007, pp. 83–95; Christopher Knowles: Our Gods Wear Spandex. The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes, San Francisco 2007; Don LoCicero: Superheroes and Gods. A Comparative Study from Babylonia to Batman, Jefferson, NC 2008; Alex Nicolavitch: Mythe & Super Héros, Lyon 2011. See also Torsten Caeners' paper in this volume, which establishes the fundamentals of this influence, with a detailed application to Superman, the first superhero.

[3] On the superhero myth, see Andrew R. Bahlmann: The Mythology of the Superhero, Jefferson, NC 2016. See also Felix Giesa / Arno Meteling: Superheroes, in: Compendium heroicum, 2022. DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/she1.0.20220927.

In fact, one can identify numerous creations in the superhero genre that are clearly inspired by characters from classical mythology.[4] *Captain Marvel* (1939) receives his powers from the invocation "Shazam!": Solomon's wisdom, Hercules' strength, Atlas' endurance, Zeus' power, Achilles' bravery, and Mercury's speed. Also worth mentioning is the Amazon Wonder Woman, a character that has attracted the interest of Classical Reception scholars.[5] In other cases, a mediated reception can even be argued, such as in the case of Hulk – the green-skinned being Bruce Banner transforms into after his accidental exposure to gamma rays. This character is an apparent rewriting of the story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Robert L. Stevenson, 1886, with many film adaptations), which ultimately goes back to the myth of Prometheus, through the recreation of Mary W. Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818).[6] Even in the postmodern deconstruction of the superhero genre, it is possible to identify explicit presences from the Classical world there, as in the case of the *Promethea* series by Alan Moore (1999–2005).[7]

These genealogical links explain the numerous parallels in their characteristic traits: the superhuman powers (strength, cunning, etc.), their names and the emblems that represent them (such as Superman's cape or Hercules' lion skin), the use of magical or technological weapons, the companionship of a younger character, the *sidekick*, with whom the hero develops a pedagogical and formative relationship, in addition to the indispensable presence of an opponent or villain or a superhuman test to overcome.

Even the physicality of these figures has points of connection. In the case of the classical hero, we ought to speak of the "undress code", a concept coined by Ulrich Bröckling,[8] since nudity is what identifies the "ancientized" hero. The superhero spandex suit serves a two-fold function: on the one hand, as Coogan indicates, "[t]he superhero costume removes the specific details of the character's

4   Luis Unceta Gómez: Mito clásico y cultura popular. Reminiscencias clásicas en el cómic estadounidense, in: Epos. Revista de Filología 23, 2007, pp. 333–344.

5   Brian M. Peters: Qu(e)erying Comic Book Culture and Representations of Sexuality in Wonder Woman, in: CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 5.3, 2003. DOI: 10.7771/1481-4374.1195; Eva M.ª Sanjuán Iglesias: Amazonas en el siglo XX. Wonder Woman, actualización de un mito, in: Minius 12, 2004, pp. 25–40; Elizabeth Danna: Wonder Woman Mythology. Heroes from the Ancient World and Their Progeny, in: Brisio J. Oropeza (ed.): The Gospel According to Superheroes. Religion and Popular Culture, Bern / Frankfurt am Main 2005, pp. 67–82; Kelli E. Stanley: "Suffering Sappho!" Wonder Woman and the (Re)Invention of the Feminine Ideal, in: Helios 32.2, 2005, pp. 143–171.

6   See Jordi Balló / Xavier Pérez: El portador de la conciencia, epilogue to Esquilo, Prometeo encadenado, edición bilingüe a cargo de Ramón Irigoyen, Barcelona 2009, pp. 133–158.

7   See Jeffrey Kripal: Mutants and Mystics. Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal. Chicago, IL 2011; nuanced by José M. Uría: Jack Kirby el cuarto demiurgo, Madrid 2013, pp. 29–58. About *Promethea*, see Carlos Sánchez Pérez: La recepción del Corpus hermeticum en Promethea de Alan Moore, in: Mireia Movellán Luis / Rodrigo Verano Liaño (eds.): E Barbatulis Puellisque, Sevilla 2015, pp. 275–282.

8   Ulrich Bröckling: Héroes postheróicos, trans. Ibon Zubiaur, Madrid 2021, p. 69 [Spanish translation of Postheroische Helden, Frankfurt am Main 2020].

ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colours and design of the costume".[9] At the same time, it reveals their hyper-trophied musculature, as if they were naked, a musculature inspired by representations of the classical hero throughout the centuries.

Similarly, from a functional point of view, certain analogies can be drawn. Peter Coogan's definition of the superhero's mission can be applied to the classical hero without the least reservation:

> The superhero's mission is pro-social and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further himself. The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic. Without this mission, a superhero would be merely an extraordinarily helpful individual in a crisis.[10]

In these concomitances, in addition to the early (and later) superhero creators taking interest in referents from the classical world, Joseph Campbell's work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), played a significant role and has been recognised as having an important mediating role in the reception of the myth-ical hero superstructure. Campbell's work had a great impact in the culture industry from the 1980s onwards, when Disney screenwriter Christopher Vogler published his famous screenwriter's guide, *A Practical Guide to The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1985), later developed into *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Struc-ture for Writers* (1992). Vogler's work has been used as a template for creating numerous scripts in different popular culture media, and it shaped both the authors' creations, and the expectations of critics and audiences, especially in comics.[11]

In the case of comics, moreover, the archetypal value of the superhero charac-ter, especially prominent in the United States, has noticeably marked the general configuration of comics as a medium. For this reason, the representations of a classical hero or classical gods in comic books are always conditioned by the prototypical traits of superheroes. Undoubtedly, this view represents an attempt to fully satisfy the expectations of an audience accustomed to certain forms and tropes. But this pre-eminence of superheroes also reveals a certain meta-referen-tiality to the hero-superhero lineage, which may be unconscious in some cases, but is essentially characteristic of the medium of comic books. Among other examples that could be cited, such a lineage is clear for instance in works like Marvel Illustrated's rewriting of the Homeric poems (especially the third one,

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[9] Peter Coogan: The Definition of the Superhero, in: Wendy Haslem et al. (eds.): Super/Heroes. From Hercules to Superman, Washington 2007, pp. 21–36, here p. 27.

[10] Ibid., p. 24.

[11] See Rebecca Housel: Myth, Morality, and the Women of the X-Men, in: Tom Morris / Matt Morris (eds.): Superheroes and Philosophy. Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way, Chicago 2005, pp. 75–88; Brett M. Rogers: Heroes UnLimited. The Theory of the Hero's Journey and the Limitation of the Superhero Myth, in: George Kovacs / C. W. Marshall (eds.): Classics and Comics, New York 2011, pp. 73–86.

The Trojan War), by Roy Thomas and Miguel Sepúlveda, a cartoonist who specialises in the superhero genre.

This phenomenon follows a certain postmodern logic of inverted hierarchies, where recent creations bear more cultural weight than canonical ones. This can be seen in other earlier works, such as the rewriting of the *Odyssey* by Jacques Lob and Georges Pichard's *Ulysses* (1974–1975). Certainly under the influence of *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft* (1968), by Swiss writer Erich von Däniken, the divine figures of epic poetry are here transformed into a group of aliens with very advanced technology. But what I would really like to underscore in regard to the appearance of these aliens is their superhero-like traits. Thus, Zeus is represented in a tight suit with a large "Z" on his chest, in the style of Superman's "S"; Polyphemus, with his helmet and the ability to shoot rays from his eyes, brings the mutant Cyclops (first appearance *X-Men* #1, 1963) to mind; and Hermes' schematic winged helmet is very similar to the one Flash wore in his first appearances in comic books (as early as 1940), which in turn was inspired by the petasos typically worn by the god Hermes himself.[12] In the same way, in the *Croniques de l'Antiquité Galactique*, the fictional universe created by French comic book author Valerie Mangin, and specifically in her *Le Fléau des Dieux* series, a space epic featuring a new galactic Aeneas, the gods are actually wise scientists who have achieved such control over physics that they have become omnipotent beings. When together, they resemble a group of superheroes more than the Olympic pantheon.[13]

The Spanish graphic novel *El héroe*, by David Rubín (2 volumes, 2011–2012), a personal rewriting of the twelve labours of Hercules, is probably one of the most developed expressions of this phenomenon – that is, the re-elaboration of the classical hero using traits that characterise the superhero, or rather, an amalgamation of the traits of both.[14] The story is set in a uchronia where elements that evoke an indeterminate Greek Antiquity are combined with others from our time (Hercules wears sneakers and listens to David Bowie's "Heroes" on his mp3), and also with features from speculative science fiction.

Throughout the whole story, it is evident that the author has a good knowledge of the myth of Hercules, but also that his intent is far from fidelity to classical sources. In addition to the anachronisms resulting from this pastiche, the

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[12] On Jacques Lob and Georges Pichard's *Ulysses*, see Luis Unceta Gómez: Odiseas del espacio. Reescrituras de la Odisea en la ciencia ficción, in: Maia. Rivista di Letterature Classiche 72.1, 2020, pp. 157–183, here pp. 173–176 (and the references therein).

[13] See Luis Unceta Gómez: Una epopeya espacial. Recepción clásica y ciencia ficción en Chroniques de l'Antiquité galactique de Valérie Mangin y Thierry Démarez, in: Antonio Duplá-Ansuátegui et al. (eds.): Del clasicismo de élite al clasicismo de masas, Madrid 2021, pp. 227–251, here pp. 241–242.

[14] I analyse this graphic novel in Luis Unceta Gómez: From Hero to Superhero. The Update of an Archetype, in: Rosario López Gregoris / Cristóbal Macías Villalobos (eds.): The Hero Reloaded. The Reinvention of the Classical Hero in Contemporary Mass Media, Amsterdam / Philadelphia 2020, pp. 1–17.

author changes, for example, the order and the nature of the hero's labours. But most striking is the ubiquitous presence of superheroes: the dolls that Eurystheus plays with as a child, the representation of the Nemean lion skin as a cape, the sidekick role of Iolaus, or the affair with Hippolyta, who is represented here with attributes of Wonder Woman.

Thus, *El héroe* clearly demonstrates that contemporary language creates new avatars of classical heroes that enrich and amplify their tradition. It also makes very clear that, in a medium such as comics, it is easy to reach an inversion of hierarchies whereby the hypertext, the archetypal superhero, becomes hypotext in revising the myth of a classical hero.[15] In the remainder of this paper, I will explore the spreading of this process in the cinematic medium, through filmic adaptations of superhero comics, and its influence in recent cinematic renditions of the classical hero, for which I will focus on Brett Ratner's *Hercules* (2014) as case study.

Superhero Filmic Adaptations and the Classical Hero

Also well-known is the recurrence of transfers between different media modalities (a phenomenon usually referred to as "intermediality" or "cross-media"). This porosity between formats has given rise to what Henry Jenkins calls "transmedia storytelling". Jenkins defines this concept as follows:

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. So, for example, in *The Matrix* franchise, key bits of information are conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. There is no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the *Matrix* universe.[16]

In this way, a phenomenon that seems to originate in one specific medium, namely, comics, is extended to other formats like video games, and especially, to cinema. In representing the superhero in these media, both critics and Classical Reception scholars have noted on the one hand that dependencies can be traced to the classical hero and classical forms of the heroic. On the other hand, the way the classical hero is represented is also influenced by the superhero archetype, especially since the boom in cinematographic adaptations of this genre, beginning in the 1990s. This movement, as suggested earlier, could be understood as inverting the direction of influence. Consider, for example, the change that occurred in the representation of Perseus, the protagonist of *Clash of the Titans*

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15   Ibid., p. 14.
16   Henry Jenkins: Transmedia Storytelling 101, 21 March 2007. henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html [27 July 2022].

(Louis Leterrier, 2010), compared to the representation of the same character in the original film by Desmond Davis (1981). Similarly, the gods in *Immortals* (Tarsem Singh, 2011) are represented and behave as a superhero group. The director himself has explained this intention in several interviews,

> I just thought that if you want to make a superhero film, these [gods] are the original super-hero guys and they seem to have much more problems than let's say the superheroes that today [sic] you have.[17]

This statement is quoted by Joel Gordon,[18] who analysed the motive of deicide in contemporary popular culture and justified its ample presence precisely because of the identification of gods and heroes of Antiquity with superheroes. The possibility of superheroes dying began to be explored in the 1980s and has since been extrapolated to gods of the classical pantheon in popular culture media. As Gordon argues,

> This association is a deeply rooted one, demonstrated by the generally fantastical nature of superheroes and also […] the 're-mythologizing' influence of Greek and Roman deities in the creation of many superheroes.[19]

For his part, Sam Summers has put forward a similar process in the Disney-fication of the Hercules myth, where Superman clearly offers a mould for representing the classical hero:[20]

> Whether they [these similarities] are a result of Superman's direct influence on the film's narrative, or whether the Superman connections are merely a *reflection* of changes made in order to accommodate traditional film structure, contemporary popular American ideologies, and a family audience, their presence in the film is undeniable.[21]

And with this transformation of the classic heroic model, *Disney's Hercules* can select certain features from the ancient myth and ignore others of great importance, thus imposing certain ideological positions that underlie the American conception of heroism, as manifested by superheroes.[22] Thus Summers concludes:

> Given that it moves away from the classical myth and towards a narrative which closely parallels the story of Superman, Disney's *Hercules* in turn, whether consciously or inci-dentally, allows the tropes of this quintessentially American storytelling tradition to sup-

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17 Rebecca Ford: Immortals Director Tarsem Singh Compares Greek Gods to Superheroes, Hollywood Reporter, 11 November 2011. www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/immortals-tarsemsingh-henry-cavill-260690 [27 July 2022].
18 Joel Gordon: When Superman Smote Zeus. Analysing Violent Deicide in Popular Culture, in: Classical Receptions Journal 9.2, 2017, pp. 211–236.
19 Ibid., p. 226.
20 Sam Summers: A Real American Hero. The Superhero-fication of Disney's Hercules, in: Alastair J.L. Blanshard / Emma Stafford (eds.): The Modern Hercules. Images of the Hero from the Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century, Leiden 2020, pp. 488–505. It is very possible that the way this film approaches the classical hero has influenced David Rubin's adaptation presented earlier.
21 Ibid., pp. 490–491.
22 Ibid., p. 494.

plant the plot of the myth which it ostensibly adapts, along with its attendant morals and ideologies.[23]

What becomes evident, then, is that these transfers (and many others that could be mentioned) across media and between genres, and the inversion of cultural hierarchies and of influence (from hero to superhero and vice versa) have established a pattern in popular culture where not only do both archetypes influence each other and in both directions, but one may think of them as overlapping, and on occasion, being mistaken for the other, whether in the creator's design process or in the audience's reception.

Case study: Brett Ratner's Hercules (2014)

To delve further into this question, I will now focus on how the boom in film adaptations of the superhero genre has influenced recent representations of the classical hero. As an illustrative example, I will consider the film *Hercules* (2014), directed by Brett Ratner. Monica Cyrino introduces the film in the following terms:

> *Hercules* (2014) is a revisionist take on the hero-pic that vigorously deconstructs the classical myths about the legendary strongman and recasts him as the leader of a motley band of mercenaries hiring out their swords and muscles for gold.[24]

This film's action, not exempt from anachronisms, takes place in Thrace, and occurs sometime after the supposed completion of the protagonist's twelve labours, whose veracity is questioned. Throughout its portrayal, the film plays with the contradiction between appearances and truth, and the legitimacy of the mythical story and its authenticity: the heads of the Lernaean Hydra are actually masks that hide human heads (those of a bunch of malefactors); the centaurs are horsemen on their mounts; and Cerberus is three huge, fierce black wolves. This is a euhemeristic approach that is very often found in both film productions and other formats that recreate ancient myth, at least since the 1980s – for example, Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel, *The Firebrand*.

All this contributes to the humanization of Hercules, something that *Variety* critic Scott Foundas noted in his analysis of the film:

> It's a grandly staged, solidly entertaining, old-fashioned adventure movie that does something no other Hercules movie has quite done before: it cuts the mythical son of Zeus down to human size (or as human as you can get while still being played by Dwayne Johnson).[25]

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23 Ibid., p. 495.
24 Monica S. Cyrino: How the Rock Became Rockules. Dwayne Johnson's Star Text in *Hercules* (2014), in: Alastair J. L. Blanshard / Emma Stafford (eds.): The Modern Hercules. Images of the Hero from the Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century, Leiden 2020, pp. 650–666, here p. 650.
25 Scott Foundas: Film Review: "Hercules", 23 July 2014, variety.com/2014/film/reviews/film-review-hercules-1201267840/ [27 July 2022].

This "humanization" is somewhat recognizable in recent renditions of Hercules,[26] and undoubtedly follows a general, recognizable trend in the superhero genre. As Joel Gordon notes,

> Over the past 50 years, contemporary culture has shifted greatly in its presentation of filmic super-heroism. No longer must heroes be perfect, infallible specimens representing everything that is good about humanity […]. Rather, contemporary films are turning more and more to the flawed hero who rises above his circumstances: in 2008 alone, audiences were introduced to a conflicted and moody Batman (*The Dark Knight*); Hancock, the drunk superhero (*Hancock*); and Iron Man, the arrogant, facetious playboy (*Iron Man*). This trend has only been strengthened with the recent success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe […]. This style of filmic hero presents audiences with a character who is just like us: anyone can be a hero or, at least, that is the line that the marketing is selling to audiences.[27]

For this reason and others, Ratner's *Hercules*, which has attracted certain interest among Classical Reception scholars, has been interpreted as a deconstruction of the mythic tale and a clearly postheroic re-creation of the tale. I will return to this question further on.

This example also illustrates the phenomenon of cross-mediality, because Ratner's work is a somewhat modified adaptation of the comic book series *The Thracian Wars* (Radical Comics), by Steve Moore and Cris Bolsin.[28] However, and this is especially interesting for my purposes here, the author of this comic series positions himself against the superhero genre, not wanting his creative work to take that slant. As Katherine Lu Hsu writes, "Moore himself states that he 'wanted, as much as possible, to treat Hercules as a real person, rather than some sort of superhero, which is a genre [he] detest[s]'".[29] For this reason, he emphasises the more sordid aspects of Hercules' traditional characterisation (sexually voracious, a drinker, impulsive, murderous), and as Lu Hsu concludes,

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[26] See Joel Gordon: "I Am Hercules in 2014". Rebooting and Rationalizing a Modern Hero, in: Alastair J. L. Blanshard / Emma Stafford (eds.): The Modern Hercules. Images of the Hero from the Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century, Leiden 2020, pp. 591–612 (esp. pp. 596–602, on the three reboots of Hercules released in 2014).

[27] Ibid., pp. 605–606.

[28] Another successful example of such a phenomenon is Zack Snyder's *300*, an adaptation from Frank Miller's homonymous graphic novel. On this adaptation, see, among many other references, Dru H. Jeffries: Comics at 300 Frames per Second: Zack Snyder's *300* and the Figural Translation of Comics to Film, in: Quarterly Review of Film and Video 31.3, 2014, pp. 266–281; Paul Burton: Eugenics, Infant Exposure, and the Enemy Within: A Pessimistic Reading of Zack Snyder's 300, in: International Journal of the Classical Tradition 24, 2017, pp. 308–330.

[29] Katherine Lu Hsu: Warriors, Murderers, Savages. Violence in Steve Moore's *Hercules: The Thracian Wars*, in: Alastair J. L. Blanshard / Emma Stafford (eds.): The Modern Hercules. Images of the Hero from the Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century, Leiden 2020, pp. 613–629, here p. 613. See also T. H. M. Gellar-Goad / John Bedingham: Hercules the Brute, Hercules the Tactician in Steve Moore's *The Thracian Wars* and the *Knives of Kush* Comics, in: Electra 3, 2014, pp. 17–26. DOI: 10.26220/ele.2178.

"without a love of honour and a hunger for glory, Hercules serves only to exemplify the moral ambiguity of violence and the limitations of heroism itself".[30]

However, the cinematic adaptation, from which Moore detached himself, produces a different result. On one hand, there is clear influence from traditional peplum films, for example the scene of Hercules in chains, which is a tribute to the one starring Steve Reeves.[31] On the other hand, surely because the success of superhero narratives is also shaping the hero representation found in action hero fantasy movies, the superheroic dimension of Hercules is emphasised using different procedures, both visual and narrative. In fact, Brett Ratner had also directed *X-Men: The Last Stand* in 2006. This dimension was also stressed during the film's promotion: for example, protagonist Dwayne Johnson announced the character on his personal Twitter account (@TheRock) as "The world's first superhero" (24 March 2014).

In the first place, the protagonist's physicality distances him from human standards and resembles the body of some superheroes with hypertrophied muscles. Monica Cyrino has extensively analysed the impact of the protagonist Dwayne Johnson as "star-text", and the conditions he imposed on the audience's interpretation of the film. Johnson's image has developed progressively, from his beginnings as a professional wrestler – linking him to other popular Hercules actors, like the aforementioned bodybuilder Steve Reeves, or Arnold Schwarzenegger, who starred in *Hercules in New York* (Arthur Allan Seidelman, 1970) –, to his roles in high-impact films, such as *The Scorpion King* (2002) and, above all, his performances in the *Fast & Furious* franchise, as well as through his great media presence. In this way, "Johnson's star text as a hard-working and heroic competitor shaped his portrayal of Hercules in the blockbuster movie".[32] In the same line, both the fight choreography and certain visual effects can also be mentioned, especially in the action scenes.

Another equally indicative aspect is the fact that the hero, at least at this point in his history, does not act alone, but as the leader of a group of mercenaries:[33] the prophet Amphiaraus of Argos; the thief Autolycus of Sparta; Tydeus of Thebes, a character with animalistic features; Amazon Atalanta of Scythia, reminiscent of Xena; Iolaus of Athens, Hercules' nephew, who acts as a bard, recounting the legend of his uncle. Each of them has certain specific abilities (foreknowledge, berserk fury, knife or arrow handling skills, or the protagonist's superhuman strength) and they complement each other effortlessly in their confrontations with the enemy. All of this is very reminiscent of the structure and functioning of superhero groups, something that undoubtedly affects the audience's interpretation of these group dynamics.

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[30]   Lu Hsu: Warriors (Fn. 29), pp. 628–629.
[31]   Gordon: I Am Hercules (Fn. 26), p. 603.
[32]   Cyrino: How the Rock (Fn. 24), p. 664.
[33]   See Angeline Chiu: Heroes and Companions in Hercules (2014), in: Antony Augoustakis / Stacie Raucci (eds.): Epic Heroes on Screen, Edinburgh 2018, pp. 60–73.

This is something that was already present in Moore's graphic novel, but the superhero genre has deeply penetrated the medium of cinema. Federico Pagello argues that superhero cinema has caused the evolution of certain patterns and narrative models of Hollywood cinema, something that he illustrates with *The Matrix* and *Unbreakable*.[34] According to this author, these two films show that "superhero fiction has become a sort of ideal 'test field' for thinking about the nature of film narrative in the larger context of post-modern culture".[35] Thus, he continues,

> thanks to its flexibility and richness, superhero fiction constitutes not only the most convenient and profitable source for Hollywood adaptations, but also one of the best models for audiovisual narrative strategies in general. Far from being purely contingent and based simply on the development of digital technologies, its success reveals crucial traits of contemporary cinema.[36]

However, the superhero genre in cinema has been evolving over the years and has followed a similar process to its development in comics. After a golden age and a silver age beginning in the 1980s, with the work of authors like Frank Miller, Alan Moore and Grant Morrison, there began a revision of this genre, marking the start of a new phase. In the most radically postmodern comics, like *Watchmen* by Alan Moore (1986–1987) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, by Frank Miller (1986), there is a subversion and deconstruction of the basic elements of the genre, leading to a darker, more complex and fissured representation of superheroes, and the latter are integrated in societies that are at the same time more open and more fragile.[37] Since the 2000s, this trend has also begun to take shape in the cinematic medium. Some creations that belong to this revisionist trend are the Dark Knight saga (*Batman Begins* [2005], *The Dark Knight* [2008], and *The Dark Knight Rises* [2012], all directed by Christopher Nolan), *Watchmen* (2009), directed by Zack Snyder, and *Kick-Ass* (2010), directed by Matthew Vaughn.

Hercules lacks some of the features typical of these adaptations – for example, it does not take the approach of *Watchmen*, which presents the story of several characters without focusing exclusively on any one, and thereby challenging "the crucial process of identification that represents one of the most efficient ways for the superhero genre to gain the readers' or viewers' adherence and affective participation".[38] However, it shares with some of those films, such as *Watchmen*, the use of flashbacks, which accounts for the conflictive subjectivity of the char-

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[34] Federico Pagello: From Frank Miller to Zack Snyder, and Return. Contemporary Superhero Comics and Post-Classical Hollywood, in: Miranda 8, 2013, DOI: 10.4000/miranda.3422.

[35] Ibid., p. 6.

[36] Ibid., p. 16.

[37] María J. Lucerga Pérez: Del uniforme del Capitán América al azul desnudo del Dr. Manhattan. Ascenso y caída del superhéroe como principio de construcción identitaria, in: Tonos. Revista electrónica de Estudios Filológicos 8, 2004. www.um.es/tonosdigital/znum8/estudios/13-supertonos.htm#_ftnref23 [27 July 2022].

[38] Pagello: From Frank Miller (Fn. 34), p. 12.

acters,[39] and which is used here mainly to present Hercules' torment and his feelings of guilt over the death of his wife and children. The moral ambiguity of the mercenary activities of the hero and his team, as well as the fraudulent exploitation of the legend created around his exploits and his claim to divine lineage, all fed by the rhetorical skills of Iolaus, are also in this same line.

Nonetheless, doubts about his honourability are dispelled at the end of the film, when Hercules and his companions (even the most reluctant) take sides against the true villain, and the moral complexity is resolved at the moment when the audience learns, along with Hercules, that he was not responsible for the murder of his family.[40]

This result is surely a simplification of the implications that could have been drawn out from this subversive, postheroic deconstruction of the Hercules myth, that somehow inverts the glorifying narrative of heroic stories by focusing on the victims and strengthens the "human side" of the hero, but it offers a predominantly young audience a clear and hopeful message about the possibilities of redemption through justice and altruistic behaviour, by staying true to one's own convictions.[41] The key, according to Jean Alvares and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell, is in self-trust and self-esteem:

> This epilogue distinguishes between Iolaus' mythological fabrications and the historical 'truth', but it also sums up a repeated, ever important, theme concerning the need for a hero, and how heroism arises from proper self-trust, a perspective now evident in a 'New Age' emphasis on self-esteem and a rather mystic sense of human potential.[42]

In this manner, the film returns to more conventional approaches that continue to favour identification of the classical hero with the archetypal superhero, since the latter is also set up as a role model and the personification of moral values and beliefs. In this regard, the words of Angela Ndalianis are quite revealing:

> Heroic action usually has a fundamental link to the welfare of the society from which the hero comes. Heroes and superheroes have never operated in a vacuum. They respond in a dynamic way to various challenges and social needs. Whether conscious or unconscious, hero narratives give substance to certain ideological myths about the society they address. Occupying a space outside culture, the super/hero often serves the function of mediator figure that enters a community in crisis with the aim of resolving its conflicts and restoring the *status quo*.[43]

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[39] Ibid.
[40] On the creation of Hercules' identity over the length of the film, see Jean Alvares / Patricia Salzman-Mitchell: Hercules' Self-Fashioning on Screen. Millennial Concerns and Political Dimensions, in: Alastair J. L. Blanshard / Emma Stafford (eds.): The Modern Hercules. Images of the Hero from the Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century, Leiden 2020, pp. 545–566 (esp. pp. 553–554).
[41] On the film as a critical response to the Hercules myth, see Alastair J. L. Blanshard: Hercules. The Mythopoetics of New Heroism, in: Antony Augoustakis / Stacie Raucci (eds.): Epic Heroes on Screen, Edinburgh 2018, pp. 28–42.
[42] Alvares / Salzman-Mitchell: Hercules' Self-Fashioning (Fn. 40), p. 562.
[43] Angela Ndalianis: Do We Need Another Hero?, in: Wendy Haslem et al. (eds.): Super/Heroes. From Hercules to Superman, Washington, DC 2007, pp. 1–9, here p. 3.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the parallels between heroes and superheroes stem both from
their genealogical relationship and from their functional concomitances, but a
process of mutual influence that has come to equate them can also be observed,
at least in their contemporary receptions. In popular culture formats, the inter-
textual relationships alternate: the hero functions as hypotext for the superhero,
but often the hierarchy is inverted, and the superhero archetype can function
as a basis for representing the classical hero. It is quite likely that this inversion
first occurred in comics but has been gradually transferred to other media. As
Alastair Blanshard points out, "we can trace the influence of comics not only in
providing subject matter, but also in the provision of new reading practices for
approaching mythological storylines".[44]

In recent years, with the huge success and commercial impact of film adap-
tations of superhero comics, this inverted hierarchy has had a great impact in
cinema (and hence in the popular imagination as well). The evolution of the
superhero genre, since the 1980s in comics and since the 2000s in film adapta-
tions, has also given way to the questioning, humanisation and problematisation
of the classical hero – a character who had generally been conceived as upright
and blameless, although none of the Greek heroes are straightforwardly heroic
in the modern sense, particularly when compared to the impossible altruistic
ideals attributed to many early American superheroes. Hercules, physically the
strongest of the Greek heroes, displays deeply problematic behaviours.

This development undoubtedly follows a more general trend in the artistic
creation of our day, but the transfers between comics and cinema have encap-
sulated it in the most stereotypical and recognisable form for mass audiences.
American comics have undoubtedly played a key role in setting the standards for
what global audiences have come to expect from a superhero (and hence from
a classical hero). The cinematic example analysed here is very telling about the
fusion of the characteristic features of superheroes in cinematic depictions of
classical heroes, both individually and as part of a group, with a natural result,
far from the pastiche-like manner recognisable in other pieces of work such as
El héroe, by David Rubín. In Ratner's *Hercules*, and in other recent productions,
this influence humanises the hero and questions his subjectivity and his actions,
something that, once again, makes it possible to transfer contemporary concerns
and conflicts to the past.

By way of conclusion, it can be said that for consumers of these popular cul-
ture products, the hero and superhero motifs overlap with each other to such
an extent that they have become a single cultural matrix, that can be developed
in different languages and in different chronological settings – both present (or
future) and past. This cultural matrix favours different combinations of certain

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[44]   Blanshard: Hercules (Fn. 41), p. 29. See further pp. 35–40.

basic heroic features,[45] but those features are recognisable to the audience as elements that make up the contemporary idea of the heroic, which obviously influences and shapes our perceptions and expectations of the classical hero. Thus, as this paper has tried to show, the analysis of the intersections between comics and filmic renditions is an area worth exploring, not only to scrutinise contemporary receptions of classical heroes, but also to fully understand why ancient mythological heroes can be still felt as heroic referents in the twenty-first century.

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[45] Bröckling: Héroes (Fn. 8), pp. 33–58, identifies and discusses the following qualities of heroic figures: exceptionality, transgressivity, agonality, masculinity, power to act, and willingness to sacrifice.