

Antiquity 2.0 – Workshop

Paris, INHA (Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art), Walter Benjamin room, Thursday, December 11th, 2014

International workshop organized by Anne-Violaine Houcke and Alan Kleinberger (Université Paris Ouest-Nanterre-La Defense, HAR – Histoire des Arts et des Représentations)

This workshop is sponsored by Labex: *Les passes dans le Présent* (<http://passes-present.eu/fr/les-projets-de-recherche/prefiguration/antiquite-20>)

Summary

The “Antiquity 2.0” project will focus on three distinctive characteristics of *Gladiator* (R. Scott, 2000), one of the first cinematographic successes of the third millennium, as the basis for broader reflection on the representation of antiquity in cinema. In the first place, the film was released in 2000, thus marking the turn of the century; secondly, the film initiates a broader return to antiquity, in what some have called a third Golden Age of the “sword and sandals” theme; finally, the film makes prominent use of digital technologies. For these reasons, *Gladiator* is an appropriate point of departure for an examination of this new era of antiquity-themed cinema as it raises new lines of critical inquiry. What strategies do directors deploy in the meditation and manipulation of the past? What aspects of antiquity do directors in our time favor most? How does cinema intersect with other media, and which antiquiti(es) are invented today in television, video games, multimedia creations, art installations, and theater performances, and internet?

“Antiquity 2.0” focuses on the representation of Greco-Roman mythology and history, while exploring antiquity-themed creations from the perspectives of several fields of research : aesthetics, sociology, philosophy, culture, technology, economics, history, ideology and politics.

The workshop aims to broaden a dialogue between French and foreign researchers working in several disciplines and to take into account a broad diversity of approaches.

The workshop is primarily exploratory. It seeks to establish new theoretical and methodological approaches, identify promising research topics, propose lines of argumentation, and lay the foundation for a more ambitious collaborative research project dealing with the representation of antiquity in the digital age, or since the turn of the century.

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Presentation

Antiquity: third millennium : a third “Golden Age”?

It's become something of a given, in critical literature, to claim that *Gladiator* (R. Scott, 2000) ushered in a third golden age for films about Greco-Roman antiquity. These included, among others, *Troy* (2004), *Alexander* (2004), *Agora* (2009), *Clash of the Titans* (2011), *Centurion* (2010), *Immortals* (2011), *The Eagle* (2011), *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), *Pompeii* (2014), *The Legend of Hercules* (2014), *Hercules* (2014).

The Old Testament too has made a comeback in such films as Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014, starring Russell Crowe), and Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, also slated for 2014. But to these Hollywood mega-productions, we might add Christophe Honoré's adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, also released in 2014. Other films, while not set in antiquity, deal with that historical period; for example, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010), *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (2013).

In the **first Golden Age** (1910-1925) for this genre, directors experimented with a new language and story telling: Greco-Roman antiquity brings a repertoire of stories and conferred legitimacy and narrative authority to the fledgling medium of cinema. But they also allowed directors to showcase the spectacle of film making as cameras became mobile (*Cabiria*, G. Pastrone, 1914).

The Robe (H. Koster, 1953), often considered by film history as the first film shot in CinemaScope, belongs to the **second Golden Age** (1950-65) in the cinematic representation of antiquity. Here too, technology plays a crucial role as cinema competed with television, and revisited the epic sagas of antiquity as a means of showcasing the grandeur of cinema, and reaffirm its superiority as a medium. Even so, during this era, television also starts offering antiquity programs and in the second half of the twentieth century, films such as *Ben-Hur* are the subject of frequent television reruns, promoting the spread of audio visual imagination of antiquity, on which rests the wave inaugurated by Ridley Scott.

Thus, if *Cabiria* embodies the era of the mobile camera, and *The Tunic* exemplifies the wide-screen era, ***Gladiator* is celebrated for its masterful use of digital technologies**. Each Golden Age, therefore, brings new technological and visual advances, which begs the question: how to read and study the relationship between the rebirth of cinematic antiquity and times when cinema re-examines itself and seeks to demonstrate its spectacular powers?

Moreover, the most recent Golden Age move far beyond the wide screen, and extends to television series, documentary fiction, video games, as well as theater and installations which make increasing use of projection screens to bring antiquity to life.

Research Contexts

In contextualizing this research, let us begin with a few fundamental observations. First, research dealing with the audiovisual representation of antiquity is relatively recent, and begins, among others, with Jon Solomon's *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (1978). Secondly, this research approached the topic primarily from the vantage point of classical history and literature. Third, most of this research has emerged from Anglo-Saxon academic circles.

Recent interest in antiquity in the art field and the favorable public response to the theme have led to a considerable expansion in academic research and publication, including, as well, a transition from Classical Tradition Studies to Classical Reception Studies. With this shift, there has emerged a renewed interest in the process of invention (filtering, selection, transformations) within the context of each new reception¹.

Since 2000, in particular, a number of publications have sought to address popular culture and the public reception of these new representations of antiquity in a sort of “democratic” critical turn. These new studies include *Imperial Projection: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Joshel, Malamud, McGuire, 2001), *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (Nisbet, 2006), and *Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture* (Lowe, Shahabudin, 2009).

Research approach

If reception studies deals with the *context* in which the reinvention of antiquity takes place, our approach seeks to **focus on the media aspect of said context**, that is, the **vehicles and mechanisms by which reception occurs**. Central to this approach is the assumption that the visual *media* include several dynamic factors influencing the transformation process, with constraints and opportunities of their own.

We propose to study two aspects of the **audio-visual representation of antiquity since 2000**. On the one hand, we will examine the **impact of digital technologies** on the representation of antiquity. On the other hand, we seek to seize on this circumscribed object – audiovisual antiquity – to explore theoretical discussions – underway since the late 1990’s – dealing with digital technologies and their impact on film and other media. In fact, the evolution of the systems, and hence that of habits, arouses heated debate between “end of cinema” or “expanded cinema”, as in the most recent work of Andre Gaudreault, *La fin du cinema?*, whose title interrogative form seems significant². We are not seeking to answer the question – what is cinema? (i.d. outside the theater, is it still “cinema”?) but rather to study the **evolution of practices**, from production to reception, in the representation of antiquity, and ultimately, to assess their impact on the contemporary imagination vis a vis antiquity.

Research Questions

How do varying disciplinary frameworks – economic, social, technological, political, ideological, aesthetic – contribute to our understanding of the recent return to antiquity in cinema?

To what extent can production constraints and strategies be invoked to explain the return of audiovisual antiquity and the forms it takes? What are the ties between the video game and film industries?

What “antiquity” are we speaking of? What historical periods, geographic areas, character or historical and mythological episodes receive the most attention?

¹ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies : Greece and Rome, New Surveys in the Classics*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

² André Gaudreault, *La Fin du cinéma ? Un média en crise à l'ère du numérique*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2013.

Are these representations seamless or not? What are the genealogical relationships between more recent representations of antiquity and their cinematic predecessors? In what shifts and evolution of topics? In what ways?

Are we indeed experiencing a third “Golden Age” in a *genre*? Is it another age of “Sword and Sandal” films? Are they epics, neo-epics?

If antiquity is really a means of representing our own modernity, do these recent representations indeed reflect our own social and cultural condition, our political debates, our economic crises? Do they, for instance, propose a progressive or conservative politics?

What is the relationship between the constraints or possibilities inherent in a particular medium and the choices that are made in what aspects of antiquity to represent?

What do new media offer in terms of how Greek tragedy and antiquity more general are represented?

What aspects of antiquity do contemporary shows, art installations (sometimes in situ: in museums, archaeological sites, etc.) chose to focus on? And what tools to they employ in their representations?

What aspect(s) of antiquity do we find represented on the internet?

Are particular viewers being targeted in these new ways (interactivity, virtuality) of representing and narrating antiquity ? Do the new media and technologies define a new form of visualization, of being a spectator?

How do we (re)think antiquity and its pedagogy through the prism of these trans- and intermedia circulations. What can be the role of docudrama, video games, or the internet?