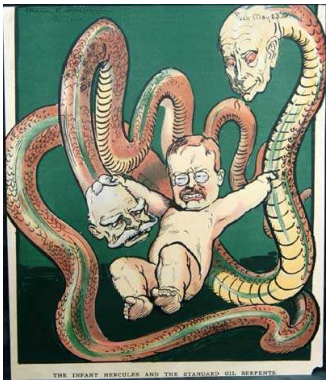
Classics in the Modern World - a Democratic Turn?

Panel: 'Democracy and popular media'.



Puck, 23/05/1906 - Theodore Roosevelt as Herakles

Panel organiser:

Alexandre G. Mitchell, University of Oxford, UK

Panel speakers:

Alexandre G. Mitchell (UK); George A. Kovacs (Canada); Antony Makrinos (UK).

There is much debate on who reads classics, both outside and inside the "classics world". Is it only of interest to the elites of this world or is it useful to non-specialists? This panel considers the reception of democracy and classical themes in a variety of visual media, from political cartoons and graphic novels to film documentaries. These genres are quite different one from another: political cartoons tend to be individual images with direct relevance to current affairs; graphic novels are made of a multitude of images and text woven into a single narrative; film documentaries are studies of a specific subject with often a broad spectatorship in mind. Although called comics, comic strips, or graphic novels without distinction, *Peanuts*, *Garfield* or *The Beano* should be better described as comics or comic strips; whereas a Frank Miller story, bound in book-form with one long storyline ought to be considered a graphic novel.

These media are inexpensive to produce, purchase or watch (in the case of documentaries), and have millions of avid readers throughout the world. This is the main reason for their democratisation and their special relationship with democratic values. For instance a political cartoon tends to confront authority, test the limits of freedom of expression and experiment with what is permissible in a democracy. Graphic novels, regardless of their narrative, may, through their chosen themes, encourage or discourage democratic values. Documentaries share some of these features.

This panel's main interest in such popular media is their use of classical themes. Encapsulating political cartoons and graphic novels, published in America and Europe as well as documentaries on the Homeric world, the panel's papers seek to address two main questions:

1/ "What do classical themes bring to the medium in question?"

2/ "To whom are these classical references addressed?"

There needs to be a move, stronger than ever, to study "popular" art forms, maybe what we currently call *media* (theatre, films, documentaries, comics, art, visual and verbal humour, poetics, political rhetoric; *new media* such as the internet) to tap in the immense reservoir of references to the classical world and understand better both our own categories of thought, and our special relationship with Greek and Roman antiquity.

1. Dr. Alexandre G. Mitchell

Classical archaeologist, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford, UK

Democracy and popular media: classical receptions in 19th and 20th centuries political cartoons: statesmen, mythological figures and celebrated artworks

There is much debate today on who reads classics. I approach the problem from a different perspective, that of visual humour, which I studied in depth in the ancient Greek context (*Greek Vase Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour* C.U.P. 2009). The previous study, of the social and political functions of humour within a democratic context, and based on the most popular and cheap art form in archaic and classical Greece, Greek pots, has given me the tools to pursue a new project. The cheapness of the product, the huge market available and the need to please customers to sell the artefacts, the wide-ranging possibilities of visual humour, and the democratic context, all pointed me in the direction of freedom of expression and popular art forms. This was for ancient Greece… what about 19th and 20th century democracies? In 1874, R. Buss wrote: "Had caricature and photography existed in past centuries, how delighted should we be to behold an Alexander, a Nero, a Caesar, or any other be-praised blood-shedder of public liberty, transfixed by the etching-needle of a Gillray or a Cruikshank! Without civil and religious liberty, joined to an unshackled press, caricature cannot exist; thus it becomes, by its free exercise, a sure exponent of the degree of freedom enjoyed in any country". There are some who assume that only the elites had/have access to classics, but what should we make of the many hundreds of caricatures in prominent newspapers, propaganda leaflets, from the 19th century to today, which use classical references, whether they are visual myths, events or statesmen, and much more, to mock current affairs? Did everyone understand the references? Who was/is mocked? The contemporary politician, or Herakles? More importantly, why would a cartoonist need a reference to Herakles, Caesar or the statue of the Laocoon to mock a 19th or 21st century politician? Does everyone understand these references today? Newspapers: the material is cheap, paper, it has to "please" the public, at least in its design if not in the information it contains; newspapers thrive in democracies. Are certain newspapers more "high brow" than others? Do they change over time? Political cartoons, as individual and powerful images, crystallise a number of different gazes all within a democratic context.

2. George A. Kovacs

Department of Ancient History and Classics, Trent University, Canada

Truth, Justice, and the Spartan Way: Affectations of Democracy in Frank Miller's 300

The comic book industry was begun in the 1930s and produced fantasy fiction in which characters fought to enforce (American) democracy. Yet these depictions are problematic: Superman and Captain America articulate their democracy by beating into submission America's foes, not by arguing for fair representation or carefully monitored elections. The superhero, an elite enforcer rather than a petitioner for social change, has been depicted in

many recent graphic novels (Moore's *V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen*; Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*) as antithetical to democracy: agents of chaos, anarchy, and even fascism.

Miller's *300*, published two years before 9/11, is replete with contradictions in its depiction of democracy. It enhances – and further distorts – the "Spartan Mirage," positioning Leonidas and his Spartans as fearsome proto-democrats, despising the Persians for the employment of slaves – denying by omission Sparta's own employment of a large slave population. Miller imbues his Spartans with a hyper-masculinity, fighting foes who are effeminate, foreign-looking, and sexually deviant, further limiting the scope of inclusivity. Snyder's 2007 film adaptation widens this Orientalist distrust of the Other (though it mitigates some of the comic's misogynistic sentiment).

This paper explores how Miller's deployment of a Classical model toward an explicitly democratic agenda articulates many of the contradictions inherent in the current American political climate of fear.

3. Dr. Antony Makrinos

Department of Greek and Latin, University College London

In search of ancient myths: documentaries and the quest for the Homeric World

The expansion of the TV audiences over the last few years has caused made-for-television series and documentaries to set new aims in their digestion of Greek and Roman world. Hollywood blockbusters introduced new audiences to Homer and aided documentaries to open debates about its depiction and to create new markets interested in exploring historical truth behind the stories. The Homeric matrix has been omnipresent over the years and directors and audiences have repeatedly assigned new meanings to it depending on current political and social dynamics. Scholarly interest in the cinematic portrayal of the Homeric epics has seen a recent resurgence and new unexplored viewpoints of the texts have come to surface. What is the relationship between the cinematographic depiction of the Homeric epics and its presentation by documentaries and how do the documentaries influence our reception of Homer?

In this talk I will examine the study of the Homeric world by documentaries, the way(s) in which they shape, transform or elaborate the views of modern (especially young) audiences and their impact on education. The need for legitimisation of our culture by the esteemed ancient cultures through a visual dialogue between modern and ancient have led to the production of counter-narratives of the past. These alternative narratives encourage modern interpretations of the ancient world by practitioners and new audiences and seek to be authorised by the classicists. Have the documentaries been successful in focusing away form the association of the Homeric epics with the élite groups? How do classicists receive this persistent search for the historical truth through fiction, and the leisure and education of suspected and uneducated audiences? Why does the *Iliad* attract more the interest of documentary makers than the *Odyssey*?

The talk will examine the role of documentary as a part of modern education and entertainment (ways of visualising the ancient, use of technological effects, representation of War, etc.) and the differentiation of the visual representation in comparison to the literary texts. The discussion will explore how and why documentary making has changed popular conceptions of the classical world and our reception of classical myth and history.

My methodology will be based on the examination of innovative techniques for the visual digestion of the Homeric narrative by modern audiences (in situ visits, archival research, archaeology, reconstructions and recreations actual or virtual, computer graphics, interactive menus). Additionally, I will examine specific themes which interest the practitioners and which associate with the literary texts or the historical sources: the visualisation of gods and heroes, women in ancient societies, use of technological effects and archaeology, religion and its impact. Overviews will be organised chronologically and thematically, based on a series of case studies selected to illustrate larger themes in the modern appropriations of the distant past.

My objectives will be to investigate the notion of a “Democratic Turn” in Homeric receptions stimulated by the practice and the research of documentary making and to evaluate the attempts to visualise and explore the Homeric world. I will aim to show –in the course of selected case studies- how the ancient world has played an essential role to the creation of highly-developed sets of cultural appropriations by documentary and its audiences. This will also help to assess the relationship between theory and practice and to explore the role of scholarship in documentary making.