Recalibrating 'Heroes and Villains'

Ancient Greek Literature through the Camera Lens[1]

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Abstract

Audiences' expectations of how a hero should behave are shaped by how the hero measures up against characters coded as villainous. This chapter examines the interdependence of these two concepts with reference to two screen case studies with direct and indirect connections to the Trojan War as an archetype for all wars. Juxtaposing William Scofield, the accidental hero of the World War I movie *1917* (DreamWorks Pictures, 2019) with the villainous Ajax in *Troy: Fall of a City* (BBC/Netflix, 2018) allows us to reflect on how radically the labels of hero and villain have been recalibrated in the second decade of the new millennium. What has not changed, however, is the ongoing role that ancient Greek literature, characters, and themes play in such conversations in our popular culture.

Looking back on ancient Greek Epic and Tragedy, through the lens of twenty-first century portrayals of war on screen, clearly demonstrates how radically the concept of heroism and associated values have evolved since classical antiquity.[2] The criteria we use to divide characters into the reductive categories of 'heroes and villains' have fundamentally shifted, as have audience expectations.[3] So far so obvious and yet, even these most conspicuous differences reward further study and reveal not only the complex dialogical mechanics of this ongoing process, but can, at times, also bring some surprising continuities to light. Using the theoretical framework of Classical Reception, this paper argues for the importance of reversing the directionality of our perspective by making the

1 Acknowledgements: Many thanks to the editors for their help and collegiality.

2 Dan Curley: The Hero in a Thousand Pieces. Antiheroes in Recent Epic Cinema, in: Antony Augustakis / Stacie Raucci (eds.): Epic Heroes on Screen, Edinburgh 2018, pp. 173–190, here p. 173.

The present work builds on my previous research on the rich interconnections between ancient and modern wars that testify to the two-way nature of the reception process. Anastasia Bakogianni / Valerie M. Hope (eds.): War as Spectacle. Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Display of Armed Conflict, London 2015; Anastasia Bakogianni: Performing Violence and War Trauma. Ajax on the Silver Screen, in: Irene Berti et al. (eds.): Ancient Violence in the Modern Imagination. The Fear and the Fury, London 2020, pp. 57–71; Anastasia Bakogianni: Shades of Ajax. In Search of the Tragic Hero in Modern War Movies, in: Ricardo Apostol / Anastasia Bakogianni (eds.): Locating Classical Receptions on Screen. Masks, Echoes, Shadows, Cham 2018, pp. 147–171.

3 Ahl draws attention to the fact that modern culture tends to oversimplify these categories. Frederick Ahl: Troy and Memorials of War, in: Martin M. Winkler (ed.): Troy. From Homer's *Iliad* to Hollywood Epic, Malden, MA / Oxford 2007, pp. 163–85, here p. 167.

modern reception(s) the starting point of our investigation.[4] This allows us to focus more fully on analysing the impact of Classics on later eras as part of the necessary examination of the ever-evolving nature of our relationship to antiquity. Charles Martindale argues that such two-directional dialogue is not "necessarily productive in outcome or easy to conduct" and while I agree with him on the second point, I would counter that such intellectually challenging research is worth pursuing for its own sake. However, Martindale's comment is a timely reminder that we must be both upfront about the scope of our investigations and transparent about the limits of our knowledge and expertise.[5]

Keeping these caveats firmly in mind, the present enquiry centres on a close examination of two screen receptions from the end of the second decade of the new millennium. The first is a "masked" reception, where I as a scholar of classical reception propose a series of meaningful thematic connections between *1917*, a 2019 war movie set during World War I, and the Trojan War as an archetype for all wars.[6] My second case study is the 2018 BBC/Netflix co-production *Troy: Fall of a City* (henceforth *TFOAC*), a screen retelling of antiquity's most famous conflict, that calls attention to its classical connections, but recasts the Trojans as the tragic heroes at the centre of the ancient story.[7] *1917* reflects twenty-first century audiences' expectations of what heroism on a battlefield should look like, which contrasts sharply with *TFOAC*'s negative portrayal of the Greeks. A few of the famous Greeks, including Helen, Achilles and Odysseus, can arguably be labelled 'anti-heroes', but the majority are portrayed as outright 'villains'. My investigation brings into dialogic conversation a 'hero' from *1917* and a 'villain' from *TFOAC* using their classical connections to Greek Epic and Tragedy in order to problematise these reductive labels, and to investigate the reasons for their enduring appeal in popular culture. They also demonstrate how our definitions of hero and villain are not only continually renegotiated but also 'interdependent'; how the extent of the latitude audiences grant protagonists to act in morally questionable ways depends on their judgements about other

4 See Hardwick on early concerns that Classical Reception Studies revealed more about the 'reception' than it did about the ancient sources. Lorna Hardwick: Reception Studies, in: Greece & Rome. New Surveys in the Classics 33.1, 2003, pp. 1–128, here p. 4.

5 Maarten De Pourcq et al.: Framing Classical Reception Studies. Introduction, in: eid. (eds.): Framing Classical Reception Studies. Different Perspectives on a Developing Field, Leiden 2020, pp. 1–12.

6 For a definition and discussion of the concept of "masked receptions" see: Anastasia Bakogianni / Ricardo Apostol: Introduction. Face to Face – Locating Classical Receptions on Screen, in: eid. (eds.): Locating Classical Receptions on Screen. Masks, Echoes, Shadows, Cham 2018, pp. 1–16, here pp. 1–6. For the Trojan War as "paradigmatic of all wars" see: Antony Augoustakis / Monica Silveira Cyrino (eds.): Introduction, in: Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City, London 2022, pp. 1–12, here p. 1. For the movie's IMDb listing, see: 1917, IMDb.com. www.imdb.com/title/tt8579674/ [15 August 2022].

7 Each of the series' eight episodes began with a reminder that the stories being retold were "Inspired by Homer and the Greek Myths". For the IMDb listing of the series, see: Troy: Fall of a City, IMDb.com. www.imdb.com/title/tt5103758/ [15 August 2022].

characters that they view as villains.[8] These two screen depictions of 'historical/mythic' wars from the past, released at the end of the second decade of the new millennium, offer a snapshot of the evolution of the concept of heroism over time. They render visible the threads that connect the concept of heroism to classical precedents and narrative patterns, and have more recently been refracted by popular culture, in particular through the long history of the screen reception of antiquity. Screen receptions, which include the media of cinema, television and now streaming platforms, often draw on antiquity in thematic vignettes, and character types.

Accidental Heroes

In his director's commentary, Sam Mendes referred to the main protagonist of *1917*, William Scofield (George MacKay), and the soldiers who fought in World War I as "accidental heroes".[9] His choice of words is indicative of a trend towards more nuanced screen depictions of war in American and British mainstream cinema, although many visual and narrative clichés continue to be employed.[10] The hero-versus-antagonist narrative stereotype has proven amongst the hardest to shake on screen, especially in the genre of war movies/series. Mendes dedicated the film to his grandfather who fought in the war, so by his own admission this is a personal movie told from a British perspective that testifies to the heroism of ordinary soldiers, while acknowledging their trauma from prolonged exposure to violence and death.[11] *1917* bookended the renaissance of war movies set during the First World War (1914-1918) released in the lead-up as well as during and in the immediate aftermath of the centenary commemorations.[12] Other notable examples that portrayed the Great War from the Allied perspective released during this period include Steven Spielberg's *War Horse* (2011),[13] James Kent's *Testament of Youth* (2014),[14] Saul Dibb's *Journey's End* (2017),[15] and Peter Jackson's

8 Matthew Grizzard et al.: Interdependence of Narrative Characters. Implications for Media Theories, in: Journal of Communication 70.2, 2020, pp. 274–301, here pp. 274–277.

9 Feature Commentary with Director / Co-Writer Sam Mendes at 01:31:49–01:31:51, included in the extras for the movie's digital release (2020).

10 These tropes became crystalized in American and British movies set during World War II. Christine Geraghty: British Cinema in the Fifties. Gender, Genre and the 'New Look', London / New York 2000, p. 178.

11 The director discusses this personal connection at length both in his commentary and in the "The Weight of the World: Sam Mendes" featurette.

12 On the centennial commemorations in a variety of media and their global reach, see: Santanu Das / Kate McLoughlin: Introduction, in: eid. (eds.): The First World War. Literature, Culture, Modernity. Proceedings of the British Academy, London 2018, pp. 1–36, here pp. 8–9.

13 War Horse, IMDb.com. www.imdb.com/title/tt1568911/ [15 August 2022].

14 Testament of Youth, IMDb.com. www.imdb.com/title/tt1441953/ [15 August 2022].

15 Journey's End, IMDb.com. www.imdb.com/title/tt3780500/ [15 August 2022].

documentary *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018).[16] As the new millennium gathered pace, the desire to re-evaluate the first conflict to receive the 'world war' label grew exponentially.[17] The particular horrors of World War I (trench warfare and its psychological impact, the unprecedented death toll and long-term impact on the survivors, their families and society in general) demanded a radical re-evaluation of the very concept of heroism on the battlefield, as well as a re-negotiation with the contemporary classical model of heroism that was in use in this period.[18] But as my two case studies demonstrate, the Graeco-Roman classics have a long, tried and tested record of adaptation that allows them to transform to fit new circumstances and environments.[19]

The power of film to convey a memorable simulacrum of the harsh realities of war is well documented.[20] A notable early example is the documentary *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) that utilised the then emerging new technology of cinema to bring audiences a curated view of this famous battle where so many soldiers lost their lives. The memorialisation of the war dead of World War I thus has roots in early cinema.[21] An example of the continuing popularity of the genre and of the screen reception of World War I is *All Quiet on the Western Front*, based on a German novel by the war veteran Erich Maria Remarque (1929, but published in serialised form at the end of 1928). The first film adaptation was released in 1930, but it was also made into a television movie in 1979, and a Netflix Original in 2022.[22] The novel's and its screen adaptations' anti-war message still resonates powerfully today, an antidote to war movies that celebrate war without adequately reflecting on the human cost of armed conflict. The history of the genre of war movies is full of examples of films that offer audiences biased interpretations of historical wars, including many that deserve the label of 'propaganda' films. But there have always been war movies that have sought to offer a more nuanced reading of historical wars, including *All Quiet on the Western Front* (in all its incarnations); a trend that gained ground in the 1960s and 1970s amid the rise of the anti-war movement

16 They Shall Not Grow Old, IMDb.com. www.imdb.com/title/tt7905466/ [15 August 2022].

17 For World War I as a 'global' conflict, see: Das / McLoughlin: Introduction (Fn. 12), pp. 24–26.

18 Angela Hobbs: Who Lied? Classical Heroism and World War I, in: Classical Receptions Journal 10.4, 2018, pp. 376–392, here pp. 389–390.

19 John Bryant: Textual Identity and Adaptive Revision. Editing Adaptation as a Fluid Text, in: Jørgen Bruhn et al. (eds.): Adaptation Studies. New Challenges, New Directions, London 2013, pp. 47–67, here p. 50.

20 Laura Marcus: First World War Film and the Face of Death, in: Santanu Das / Kate McLoughlin (eds.): The First World War. Literature, Culture, Modernity, Oxford 2018, pp. 114–127, here p. 127.

21 Glen Jeansonne / David Luhrssen: War on the Silver Screen. Shaping America's Perception of History, Lincoln 2014, pp. 1–27, here p. 7.

22 Lewis Milestone directed the 1930 version: www.imdb.com/title/tt0020629/ [17 September 2022]. For a useful discussion of the movie see: Jeansonne / Luhrssen: War on the Silver Screen (Fn. 21), pp. 7–11. For the television movie: www.imdb.com/title/tt0078753/ [17 September 2022]. Edward Berger's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (2022) is thus the third movie of the same title: www.imdb.com/title/tt1016150/ [17 September 2022].

in response to the Vietnam War and other contemporary conflicts.[23] In the new millennium, more critical interpretations of historical as well as recent conflicts receive critical acclaim, even if they are not always commercially successful.[24] Audiences, it seems, still largely prefer movies (and series) that present them with clear distinctions between their heroes and villains, but the criteria used by viewers to arrive at such judgements have changed over time.

Even as early as the first decades of the twentieth century, the then still young medium of cinema instituted new traditions and created its own popular narratives, while continuing to draw on classical models both directly and indirectly via the long history of the reception of these models through the centuries in the arts. In this paper I examine four important war movie conventions in relation to my two case studies vis-à-vis classical precedents: 1. the choice of perspective (through which side's viewpoint does the audience largely or even entirely view the conflict) which determines who is assigned the label of hero(es); 2. the protagonist(s)'s drive towards a specific objective, usually against all odds (a heroic journey that often culminates in a memorable *aristeia* moment, where the hero(es) demonstrate their bravery, even if ultimately, they cannot alter the course of the conflict); 3. encounters with the dead, which can include modern versions of the descent into the underworld (*katabasis*); and 4. brief meetings with civilians, who remind the soldiers of times of peace, and of the domestic realm of family and children. These cinematic conventions were first tested in the fires of World War I and its bitter aftermath but became more widely established in World War II movies and later problematised but still used in modified form in Vietnam war movies and the conflicts of the new millennium.

1. Perspective and the protagonist(s)

In war movies, the camera usually follows an individual or small band of soldiers whose actions and experiences are set against the larger conflict. This is a pattern familiar to us from the *Iliad*, which focuses on an elite band of warriors and their exploits, although in sharp contrast to most war movies the epic devotes space to both sides of the conflict. In the ancient epic the Greek and Trojan armies appear

[23] Just as in World War I, the Classics acted as a sounding board for discussions of the Vietnam War, in particular *The Iliad*. One famous example is Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994), a study that drew parallels between the Iliadic heroes and Vietnam veterans. More recently, classical scholars have used modern conflicts as a way of reflecting on ancient wars. Aislinn Melchior: Caesar in Vietnam. Did Roman Soldiers Suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?, in: Greece & Rome 58.2, 2011, pp. 209–23.

[24] An illustrative example is the critical success of *The Hurt Locker* (2008), versus the commercial success of *American Sniper* (2014). The difference in box-office revenue between the two films (gross worldwide according to IMDb: 49.2 million USD versus 547.4 million USD) testifies that the movie-going public still prefers films that cast their warrior protagonists in heroic roles.

but infrequently, usually in what in Film Studies terminology are referred to as extreme long shots (scenes that give the viewer the opportunity to experience the setting or environment). For example, when Agamemnon orders the Greek army into action early in the epic in the false belief that the gods have promised him victory, the Greek army is described in a series of striking Homeric similes. They create in the mind of the audience a visual spectacle of a large force moving at speed through the plain of Troy, eager for the fight.[25] Unlike the ancient Greek epic, war movies tend to foreground the experience of common soldiers like Scofield. The only named commoner who briefly appears in the *Iliad*, Thersites, is put in his place by Odysseus for daring to criticise King Agamemnon.[26] Despite these key differences, examining closely the path the hero's journey takes in *1917* helps us uncover several connections to classical precedents thus testifying not only to their durability and popularity, but also to their Protean adaptability.

In the character of Scofield, Mendes and Krysty Wilson-Cairns who co-wrote the script created their own twenty-first century version of the world-weary, cynical but ultimately sympathetic soldier. His companion for the first part of the movie is the less experienced Lance Corporal Tom Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman) who is killed within the first hour of the movie while trying to help a downed German pilot. This leaves Scofield to continue their mission alone. Pairing a more experienced soldier with a younger recruit that can benefit from his guidance is a plot device often employed in war movies. Often the innocent, young soldier dies as a symbol of the futility of the war and its human cost, as in *1917*.[27] It is Blake who accepts the movie's version of the hero's journey in the opening scenes of the film. He is manipulated by his superiors into volunteering for a dangerous mission; carrying a message through enemy lines to halt a British offensive (his brother is among the soldiers scheduled to take part in the offensive that new intelligence has revealed to be a German trap). Scofield is embroiled in the mission against his better judgement, but over the course of the movie his layers of cynicism are gradually and painfully peeled away to reveal a devoted friend inspired to continue the hero's journey alone in honour of his dead friend's memory.

A war movie's perspective can help the audience come to terms with the negative consequences of war on the intellectual and more crucially the emotional level. Appeals to emotion are "grist for box office success" helping to establish for the audience who the heroes and villains of the conflict were, thus shaping our view of past wars.[28] A war movie's choice of perspective ultimately deter-

25 Hom. Il. 2.442–93.
26 Hom. Il. 2.211–277.
27 Another memorable pairing of an idealist and a cynic in a World War I movie is that of Archie Hamilton (Mark Lee) and Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson) in *Gallipoli* (1981): Gallipoli, IMDb.com. www.imdb.com/title/tt0082432/ [29 September 2022]. Their friendship also prematurely ends with the death of the more unworldly partner. Jeansonne / Luhrssen: War on the Silver Screen (Fn. 21), pp. 24–25.
28 Jeansonne / Luhrssen: War on the Silver Screen (Fn. 21), p. xi.

mines how the conflict is portrayed and determines the affective disposition of the audience towards the characters (whether they view them in largely positive or negative terms).[29] Recent research in affective research theory highlights the "interdependence" of the categories of hero and villain in shaping audience response.[30] To use an example from *1917*, Scofield strangles a young German soldier to death, but this action is portrayed in the film as necessary. He is alone in a city occupied by enemy forces, but despite the mortal danger to himself he still gives the younger man a chance to survive, if he keeps quiet. It is only when the young German tries to summon his comrade that Scofield attacks him. The movie portrays Scofield's actions not as motivated by hatred but dictated by his survival instinct and his commitment to his mission. This terrible killing is thus rendered more acceptable or at least understandable for viewers who can thus maintain their allegiance to Scofield even when he kills.

In the first part of the movie, the audience accompanies Blake and Scofield, and on several occasions the camera allows the viewer to observe them from behind, as if the audience were following in their footsteps. However, after Blake's death the audience are often the only witnesses to Scofield's onward journey and some of the darkest trials he faces, thus creating the illusion of intimacy between viewer and protagonist. For most of the film the audience is observing the world the movie has built through Scofield's eyes. The audience is thus strongly encouraged to adopt his viewpoint, or at the very least to share it to a large degree.

2. The protagonist(s)'s mission and aristeia

Scofield's *aristeia* involves delivering the message to stop the assault and at least temporarily saving the lives of the men of the '2nd Devons' (the 2nd Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment).[31] The film both reinforces and undercuts the popular perception of World War I as a series of suicidal attacks ordered by an uncaring and delusional Allied High Command convinced that victory was within their grasp if they just kept throwing more men and shells at the enemy. In the movie, the commanders who represent this point of view become the very embodiment of the ancient concept of *hubris*. An example of this is the unredeemable Colonel Collins (played with great gusto by Richard McGabe) whom Scofield encounters soon after the death of his friend. Collins is introduced to the audience shouting orders at his men from the comfort of his chauffeur-driven army vehicle, while the soldiers are straining to lift a fallen tree that is blocking the convoy's path. His arrogant assumption that they are all cowardly, lazy, and incompetent is

29 Grizzard et al: Interdependence (Fn. 8), p. 274.
30 Ibid., p. 275.
31 The Devonshire Regiment in World War I, Lives of the First World War (IWM). livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/story/97202 [17 September 2022].

contrasted to Captain Smith's behaviour (played by Mark Strong), who offers Scofield a ride in the causals' truck and some sage advice. The hero and by extension the audience is made privy to the soldiers' conversation, as they criticise the way the war is being fought and the very reasons for getting embroiled in it in the first place. Smith's prescient advice that "Some men just want the fight" forewarns Scofield that it will be hard to convince the commander of the 2nd Devons, Colonel MacKenzie (Benedict Cumberbatch), to halt the offensive. The only way is to deliver the orders he is carrying in the presence of witnesses, so that MacKenzie cannot dismiss them outright.

Ultimately, Scofield only partially succeeds in his mission to put a stop to the fighting. He is too late for many men whose grisly fate he witnesses in the tent for the wounded. It is, in any case, only a temporary ceasefire, as the viewer knows more death and suffering will follow before the 1918 armistice was finally signed. World War I re-introduced the concept of total war (conflicts that engulf whole societies and are characterised by the destruction of both the natural and human worlds) into popular consciousness, alas an all-too familiar phenomenon to students of the ancient world, a period which witnessed many such conflagrations, memorably exemplified in the Greek Epic Cycle.

Echoes of the bond between Achilles, the Achaeans' best warrior, and his companion Patroclus resonate beneath the surface of *1917*, but with major differences that testify to the radical shift in how we evaluate battlefield heroism. As in the *Iliad*, Scofield is galvanised by grief and anger, but does not unleash his rage in a sustained, frenzied attack, as in the ancient war epic, although he does shoot dead the German pilot who knifed his friend. His primary reaction is a renewed determination to halt the attack and to save lives. "I know the way" he reassures the dying Blake. Rage and bloodlust no longer seem to be acceptable traits for a warrior. The camera lingers on Blake's death scene as Scofield holds him in his arms and tries to offer him some comfort, including helping him to gaze one last time at a photo of his family. Unlike Achilles, Scofield barely has a moment to mourn before a group of British soldiers appear and help him move the body of his friend, from the mud it is lying in, to a fresh patch of grass. He tries to wipe Blake's blood from his hands, but he is not granted enough time even for that because he must continue his time-sensitive mission (in an Aristotelian twist he has just a day to accomplish this now sacred task). Scofield's grief is thus repressed and finds an outlet in the very decision to continue on alone. Perhaps even more directly his grief can be seen in the physical effort he expends to get the army truck he is riding in back on track after it becomes stuck in mud, so that he at least stands a chance of reaching the 2nd Devons in time and fulfilling the death-bed promise he made to his friend.[32] Scofield is thus a modern take on the old movie cliché of the strong, silent type (of hero).

[32] Feature Commentary with Director / Co-Writer Sam Mendes at 01:08:07–01:08:12.

3. Encounters with the dead

Death is the protagonist's constant companion in *1917*, threatening both his life and mission. A liminal state of being which is vividly captured by *The Iliad*'s "spectacles of graphic violence".[33] Scofield's dangerous journey leads him through a series of war-torn landscapes: from no-man's land, through the enemy's abandoned trenches (a version of the ancient *katabasis*, the descent into the underworld, with all its attended dangers, where Scofield nearly ends up buried alive), the abandoned farm (where Blake is killed), the nightmarish, still smouldering ruins of the local town destroyed by shelling, and finally the river of bodies that leads back to another stretch of no-man's land and another ongoing battle. In his director's commentary, Mendes describes Scofield's crossing of Écoust-Saint-Mein, the French town destroyed in the fighting, as a "Dantesque journey into the underworld".[34] Dante Alighieri's *La divina commedia* (c. 1308–1321), itself a reception of Graeco-Roman models, further strengthens the thematic connections between *1917* and classical precedents filtered through their long reception trajectory. Stories where a mortal man "descends to and returns from the land of the dead, a place where heroism is defined, insight obtained, and identities transformed" were popular in classical literature and have their roots in earlier oral culture, which in turn drew on Near Eastern models.[35] The hero's descent into the underworld in Book 11 of *The Odyssey* (*Nekyia*), became emblematic of how the ancient Greeks conceptualised encounters with the dead and a potent model for later authors and artists.[36] The key difference between Odysseus, the ancient Greek epic hero, and our modern 'accidental' hero, is that the former is explicitly marked out as exceptional, whereas the film insists on Scofield's ordinariness.[37] In a world where death casts such a long shadow over the living, just the ability to keep moving forward is in itself an act of bravery.[38]

The first *katabasis* in *1917* originates in Blake and Scofield's decision to traverse the network of abandoned German trenches where they nearly lose their lives, presaged by their harrowing journey through a stretch of no-man's land, strewn with the rotting corpses of the dead. Scofield has a particularly close encounter with one of the dead in no-man's land. He accidently rams his hand through the exposed belly of a rotting corpse. He has a close brush with death when a rat trips a wire, setting off an explosion that collapses the tunnel. Scofield is blinded by the falling rubble and must rely entirely on Blake, who, unlike

33 Tobias Myers: 'What if We Had a War and *Everybody* Came?' War as Spectacle and the Duel of *Iliad* 3, in: Anastasia Bakogianni / Valerie M. Hope (eds.): War as Spectacle. Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Display of Armed Conflict, London 2015, pp. 25–42, here p. 40.
34 Feature Commentary with Director/ Co-Writer Sam Mendes at 01:08:07–01:08:12.
35 Judith Fletcher: Myths of the Underworld in Contemporary Culture. The Backwards Gaze, Oxford 2019, p. 1.
36 Ibid., pp. 15–24.
37 Ibid., p. 24.
38 Hobbs: Who Lied? (Fn. 18), p. 390.

Orpheus, manages to lead his friend safely out of this dangerous underworld. Blake gives Scofield water from his own canteen to wash out the dust from his eyes, so that he can gaze on the world above ground once more. This section of the film thus involves a series of encounters both with the dead and with a version of the underworld, which serve to highlight the fragility of human life in war-blighted environments. The veil between the living and the dead is thin in such liminal places, bringing the protagonists (and the viewer who is following their journey) face to face with the graphic horror of the aftermath of battle: the rotting corpses of men and animals, infested by vermin feasting on dead flesh, the lifeless soil turned to mud, hollowed out by shelling, and ring-fenced by barbed wire.

Scofield's second and longer *katabasis* begins when he crosses into the war-torn town of Écoust-Saint-Mein via the mangled remains of a downed bridge. In the movie, the historic town becomes a symbolic World War I version of the ancient Greek underworld, a dangerous place where the hero's mettle is tested. Scofield chooses to continue this harrowing journey out of a sense of devotion to his dead friend, rather than out of blind obedience to the British High Command. The film portrays his decision as heroic, valorising comradeship among soldiers in times of war. Scofield's crossing of a river is particularly significant; water often signaled an important transition in ancient Greek thought, a threshold that heroes had to cross to reach the underworld (for example, Odysseus and his companions sailed to the end of the Ocean). Scofield leaves behind the relative safety of his temporary companions (from the casuals' truck) for a place where he must fight on alone for his very survival. He faces three tests on this personal battlefield, the first immediately upon entering the town, resembles a modern version of the Iliadic one-on-one duel. In a tense and dramatic scene, Scofield exchanges fire with a German sniper and manages to kill him, but not before a bullet knocks him unconscious. The screen goes black, the audience visually experiences the hero's loss of consciousness. Scofield wakes up at night in a nightmarish landscape of fire and shadows. As flares explode above, he must run through a gauntlet of enemy fire. He takes temporary refuge in the basement of a ruined building (where the worlds of war and peace intersect as will be discussed in the next section), but the urgent nature of his message forces him onwards. It is at this point in the film when he strangles the young German soldier to stop him from giving away his position. He is discovered, nonetheless, and must run again as fast as he can, pursued like a hunted animal through the town. Finally, he is forced to jump into another section of the river to escape. This is one of the longest sequences in the film and a particularly harrowing series of tests for the protagonist who barely makes it out alive (the encounter in the basement only serves to highlight the stark contrast between peace and war).

A third close encounter with death follows before Schofield finally reaches the 2nd Devons. The rushing river sweeps him along before finally bringing him to calmer waters. But before he can finally leave behind this watery boundary and

re-enter the world of the living, Scofield must swim through the waterlogged and bloated corpses of some of the town's inhabitants that the rushing waters have deposited in this stretch in the river. This quiet moment of horror is reminiscent of the scene in *The Iliad* when the river Scamander becomes choked by the bodies of the Trojans Achilles has killed. The personified river admonishes the Greek hero for polluting its waters with so many corpses.[39] But there is no divine admonition or help for Scofield, who must wade out of the river on his own. Even after he finds the 2nd Devons, his close encounters with death and the dying are not over. He is too late to prevent the first wave of soldiers from going over, so he takes a suicidal risk to deliver his message and runs across no-man's land under heavy fire and shelling. Afterwards, Scofield (internal guide) and the viewer (external audience) witnesses the long lines of the wounded and dying in the medical tents. The camera slowly passes over these horrific sights to emphasise the death and suffering that war brings, with Colonel Mackenzie's chilling words that the only way the war will end is to fight till the "last man standing", still ringing in the audience's ears. Another stark reminder, if one was needed, that Scofield's mission only temporarily pauses the fighting. Both the internal and the external audiences know more death, pain and suffering lies ahead for these soldiers.

4. Reminders of the domestic sphere and a peaceful world

A particularly striking feature of *The Iliad* is how peace is contrasted to the *kleos* (glory) and dangers of the battlefield. However, just as ideas about heroism have changed since antiquity, so has the concept of 'peace' been refracted to address contemporary needs and values.[40] Within this complex reception nexus, the way in which the world of peace is represented in *1917* reveals a specific interpretation of this concept at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, and its relationship to its antonym, war, which dominates the movie. The protagonist, and by extension the audience, is granted brief glimpses of the natural world and of family life. The brevity of these encounters, however, is designed to act as a potent reminder of the singular position that World War I held in the public imagination as its centenary was commemorated and in the immediate aftermath. As a British war movie, *1917* remembers the heroism of ordinary soldiers, commemorates their sacrifices, but does not endorse the war itself and the terrible destruction it wrought. Nonetheless, echoes of the *kleos* do resonate across *1917*, for example, Scofield's brave decision to face danger again and again in order to deliver his message.

39 Hom. Il. 21.209–248.

40 Lorna Hardwick: The Poetics of Cultural Memory. WWI Refractions of Ancient Peace, in: Classical Receptions Journal 10.4, 2018, pp. 393–414.

The film opens and ends with the protagonist(s) in natural landscapes that remind us that there is a world beyond that of the human war being waged. The audience is introduced to Blake and Scofield during a peaceful moment in a field of flowers, and the story comes full circle with Scofield leaning against a tree overlooking another green field at the end of the movie. Tied to these brief lulls in the fighting and the sharp contrast with the natural world are reminders of the families Blake and Scofield have left behind. Scofield confesses to Blake at the beginning of the film, as they are taking a break, that it is easier not to go back home on leave. Just before they enter the abandoned farmhouse via the field of trees in bloom (springtime, the time of natural regeneration) that have been chopped down by the retreating Germans, Scofield explains why. He hates being back because he knows he will only have to leave again. As Blake reminds his friend, nature can and will recover after the fighting has ended, the trees can survive man's destructive nature. Blake will die on the grounds of this farmhouse. Afterwards, Scofield moves him to a grassy patch of ground because it makes for a better final resting place for his companion. One of Blake's last acts is to gaze at a photo of his family, and at the end of the film it is revealed that Scofield has been carrying a photo of his family all this time, which he takes out while taking another momentary break from the sphere of war to rest against the tree in a green grass field. His future remains uncertain, but in nature there is at least a glimpse of hope.

There is a scene in *1917* that powerfully evokes Hector's final meeting with his family in Book 6 of *The Iliad*,[41] a memorable moment when the worlds of war and of the *oikos* (family/household) collide in the epic. Scofield meets Lauri, a young French woman (played by Claire Duburcq) and the baby she rescued from the ruins of the town of Écoust-Saint-Mein. They are taking refuge in the basement where he also hides. A brief but memorable moment of human connection follows a break from the hero's journey. Scofield reassures Lauri that he intends them no harm. She tends to his head wound, and he gives her his food supplies, and milk from the farm for the baby. In the only pseudo-domestic scene in the entire film, Scofield sings a song to calm the baby, a reminder that he too is a father and not just a soldier. But he must continue his mission, so despite Lauri's pleas to stay with them he chooses to re-enter the world of war (as Hector did). In both the epic and the movie, this brief encounter with a woman and child serves to remind audiences that the protagonists have different roles in the domestic sphere and more generally in times of peace. The contrast reinforces the human cost of war on both the soldiers and on non-combatants.

As Elizabeth Vandiver aptly put it, for those familiar with the Classics, there is a "haunting sense of familiarity" to be found in World War I narratives.[42] This

41 Hom. Il. 6.390–502.

42 Elizabeth Vandiver: Afterword, in: Classical Receptions Journal 10.4, 2018, pp. 496–500, here p. 497.

sense of familiarity also haunts the silver screen both on the visual and the narrative planes. In literature, and especially in the war poetry produced by the conflict, the connections to the classics tend to be more explicit in nature, but in film these connections are usually absorbed into the narrative and become less direct and more 'masked'. However, major themes such as the hero's journey, encounters with the dead, the contrast between the domains of war and peace, and the personal and societal toll of war, do often, if arguably more obliquely, reference classical precedents. Moreover, they do so with a rich "multivalence" that makes room for new versions of the hero to emerge, even if the reasons for going to war have been revisited and found wanting.[43] *1917*, released over a hundred years after the historical war it dramatises, is itself a reception at the head of a long line of receptions. These receptions are comprised not only of World War I oral narratives (as related to the director by his grandfather, the origin story for the movie's plot), but a wealth of other textual and cinematic models created in the last hundred years. The 'masked' classical connections that these precedents activate help pull the film into the orbit of classical antiquity.

Irredeemable Villains

TFOAC is set in Iliadic territory but applies a 'tragic' lens to the story of the fall of Troy. The series does not presuppose a knowledgeable audience familiar with its classical sources. It also offers its own distinctive interpretation of events and protagonists. The title signals to viewers that the city is destined to fall making *TFOAC*'s recasting of the Trojans as the heroes of the story even more 'tragic' as their city is destroyed and the majority of its 'heroes' die. The series' pro-Trojan agenda thus necessitates casting the Greeks in the role of antagonist/villain. The anti-war interpretation of the Trojan War currently holds such sway in the public imagination that the Greeks are cast in the darkest light. One of the byproducts of this interpretation was a split of the reception of Ajax into two strands, an Iliadic (on screen) and a tragic one (on stage).[44] In this paper I am concerned only with the former and the sharp contrast that the character of Ajax in *TFOAC* offers with Scofield, the new type of war hero in *1917*.

43 Elizabeth Vandiver defines this term in her seminal monograph: Stand in the Trench, Achilles. Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War, Oxford 2010, p. 393.

44 For the history of the hero's reception on screen see Anastasia Bakogianni: Fallen Heroes. Recasting Ajax and the Greeks on Screen, in: Antony Augoustakis / Monica Cyrino (eds.): Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City, London 2022, pp. 155–168, here pp. 160–165. For Ajax's reception more generally see Martina Treu: Ajax, in: Rosanna Lauriola / Kyriakos N. Demetriou (eds.): Companion to the Reception of Sophocles (Brill's Companion to Classical Reception 10), Leiden 2017, pp. 27–76.

1. The villain's role

Villains often serve as plot devices to emphasise the heroism of the protagonists by means of contrast. Ajax's fifteen minutes of fame (his *aristeia* scene) in Episode Two of *TFOAC* take place during the opening battle between the Greeks and the Trojans. This visually striking sequence weaves together slow motion with regular speed edits to depict the first engagement between the Greek and the Trojan armies. The goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite drift unseen among the warriors, inspiring them to great feats of valour. Owen Harris, who directed the episode, and his team of collaborators created a powerful visual and aural aesthetic that conveys the excitement of the call to battle, an aspect of war that tends to be downplayed in modern depictions of armed conflict. Ajax (played by Garth Breytenbach) is memorably the very first warrior on either side to be blessed. Hera refers to him as "Ajax of Telamon, unbeatable in brawl".[45] The audience catches only a brief glimpse of Ajax running into battle in slow motion, carrying a formidable-looking war hammer, but not his famous leather shield. Ajax's legendary prowess in battle in the ancient epic is reduced in *TFOAC* to the lesser accomplishment of being a champion brawler. His moment to be the best of them all is thus all too brief.[46]

This is one of the few scenes in the series that offers spectators a sense of the excitement of battle and the pursuit of *arete* (excellence) that pervades *The Iliad*. As in *1917*, the emphasis is firmly on the cost of war, as signaled by the screen turning red, as 'blood' splashes onto the eye of the camera, when the warriors engage with each other, and viewers witness the killing begin. In *TFOAC*, the mood quickly shifts, and the narrative fast-forwards to the battle's aftermath. Against a soundtrack of the agonised cries and groans of the wounded warriors it becomes clear that there can be no easy victory in this war. The sense of tragedy is compounded in the series by Odysseus' pronouncement that they have not gained "one inch of ground".[47] All this pain, suffering, and death has gained them no real advantage. The Greek warrior's palpable frustration powerfully echoes the famous narratives of fighting in the trenches in World War I. This scene exemplifies *TFOAC*'s anti-war stance, aligning the series with the dominant interpretation of the Homeric epic in public debates.[48]

The anti-war interpretation of classical texts gained new momentum in the late 1960s, with the rise of protest movements against contemporary conflicts like the Vietnam War. The popular perception of World War I generals as deluded and incompetent also dates back to this period, and is exemplified in *TFOAC*'s version of Agamemnon, who arrogantly believes that the Greeks can

45 Episode 2: Conditions at 00:12:76–00:12:81.
46 Bakogianni: Shades of Ajax (Fn. 2), pp. 149–150.
47 Episode 2 at 00:51:92–00:51:93.
48 Marianna Torgovnick: Rereading *The Iliad* in a Time of War, in: Proceedings of the Modern Language Association 124.5, 2009, pp. 1838–1841, here pp. 1840–1841.

capture Troy in an outright assault. After the failure of their opening diplomatic overtures, the expedition's leader decides to attack. Agamemnon's deluded belief that the gods have guaranteed him a quick and decisive victory because he sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, at Aulis is an early sign of his bad leadership both on and off the battlefield, his descent into madness, and the destruction of the last shreds of his humanity.[49]

The dehumanising effects of Agamemnon's leadership, and the protracted war on his army are thus prefigured in this first engagement. The marked downwards trajectory of the Greek characters, including minor players like Ajax, is designed to disquiet and disturb audiences. As a result of the war, the Greeks become ever more brutal and deceitful as the story unfolds, but *TFOAC* makes it clear from the beginning that they possess few, if any, redeeming qualities. The viewers' introduction to the character of Ajax is a case in point. Ajax is depicted as a burly warrior, eating and drinking in the army camp at Aulis, sitting next to Odysseus who jokingly remarks to his fellow soldier: "Ajax, what do you know about women? Stick to fighting and spitting".[50] Viewers might at first be inclined to ascribe this unprepossessing first encounter with the character to the banter of soldiers, but everything we see of Ajax in the series reaffirms this negative first impression, which aligns with the dominant trend in Ajax's reception on screen as a man who relies on his brawn rather than his intellect.[51]

Ajax appears throughout the series, but he serves as a glorified extra, added to scenes featuring other Greek leaders, who are codified as his intellectual superiors. He is portrayed as a man who is used to following orders rather than thinking for himself, a foil to the series' angst-ridden Achilles and his existential questioning. Ajax tends to blend into the background in *TFOAC*, he is present in the two war councils in Episode Five, for example, but leaves the talking and strategising to the other characters. His complicity is underscored, however, in Episode Seven, when he silently endorses the plan to deceive Achilles into believing that the Trojans broke the truce, which leads directly to Achilles' death. When Menelaus faces Paris in single combat in Episode Four, Ajax bangs his war club as a show of support for the Greek champion, and his fellow-soldiers pick up the beat. Even without using words, Ajax endorses the decisions and actions of his leaders and helps put them into effect. In the last episode, the final touches are added to his characterisation in the series as the Greeks' brutish henchman. He manhandles Helen forcing her back into the city, so she can witness Troy's

49 For a closer analysis of Agamemnon in *TFOAC* and the impact of Iphigenia's sacrifice on her father, see Amy L. Norgard: Bloody Brides. Iphigenia, Helen and Ritual Exchange, in: Antony Augoustakis / Monica Cyrino (eds.): Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City, London 2022, pp. 183–196. See also Krishni Burns: Kings of Men and Sacrificial Daughters, in: Antony Augoustakis / Monica Cyrino (eds.): Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City, London 2022, pp. 197–210, here pp. 200–203.

50 Episode 2 at 00:12:76–00:12:81.

51 Bakogianni: Performing Violence (Fn. 2), p. 60.

destruction firsthand, and after Menelaus kills Paris in front of her, he lifts her up bodily and carries her away. Ajax sets up Menelaus' killing of Paris by first head-butting and then disarming Paris. In a later scene, he physically prevents Andromache from stopping Odysseus when he takes baby Astyanax to the top of the walls and drops him to his death.[52] The Iliadic Ajax's loyalty is thus cast in a dark light in the series, transformed into unthinking obedience and a willing participation in war crimes.

In Episode Four, Ajax brutally attacks Thersites for his outburst; a short expletive that succinctly captures the Greeks' fear of the impact of Achilles' withdrawal from battle. This scene both echoes and reinforces the Iliadic episode where Odysseus brutally silences Thersites for criticising Agamemnon. The rigidity of the Greek social hierarchy is thus played out in front of the series' audience. Greece is codified as a place where the strong abuse the weak and high-status individuals can brutally chastise those below them in rank. However, by the end of Episode Eight, Ajax and Thersites are working in concert to crush the final embers of the survivors' hopes for the future (or so they believe). It is Thersites who reveals the presence of Troy's last surviving male heir, Hector and Andromache's son, Astyanax. He thus undoes Odysseus' act of mercy during the previous night's killing orgy. Odysseus had planned to leave the baby alive behind with his nurse. Thersites drags them out to the light, while Ajax restrains his mother, desperate to stop Odysseus from carrying out Agamemnon's command that he kill Troy's last male prince.

The Greeks are thus re-envisioned in *TFOAC* as archetypes of toxic masculinity, treating their women and their subordinates appallingly and quarreling amongst themselves over status and the spoils of war. Their greed and ambition are what unites them, but it is a fragile, unstable alliance. In the BBC/Netflix version of the story, the war ends up destroying both sides: death and enslavement for the Trojans (as in the epic cycle and in Greek tragedy) and moral debasement for the victorious Greeks, although if Ajax and Thersites are anything to go by, there was not much to admire about the Greeks in the first place. By contrasting Scofield's quiet heroism in *1917* with Ajax's brash bravado and cruelty in *TFOAC*, a picture emerges of what audiences expect of a 'war hero' at the end of the second decade of the new millennium: the ability to continue against all odds, fighting on not 'for king and country', but for the sake of personal relationships. Scofield's devotion to Blake, his love for his family and the kindness he shows to Lauri and the baby contrast with Ajax's unthinking brutality and the joy he takes in cruel acts.

52 For an analysis of this key scene in the series, see Meredith Prince: Family vs. Compassion. Odysseus and the Ethics of War, in: Antony Augoustakis / Monica Cyrino (eds.): Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City, London 2022, pp. 169–182, here pp. 176–180.

2. A question of perspective

Stories about the Trojan War, its prequel, and the aftermath, have been retold countless times in movies, television series, and documentary formats. The Trojan War is not only inextricably linked to the origins of the medium of cinema, but it also found fertile ground in the newer medium of television, which broadly defined now includes streaming platforms like Netflix.[53] The mediums of cinema and television have helped to popularise a particular interpretation of the story that favours the Trojans. *TFOAC*'s Ajax is relegated to the background, while his fellow Greeks wage war on Troy and eventually destroy it. The Paris-Helen romance becomes the moral centre of the story, while the Greeks are cast in the role of greedy, ambitious, and treacherous villains.

In *The Iliad,* Ajax is the second-best warrior that the Greeks put in the field. However, in his reception on screen, Ajax's strength, courage, and steadfastness are, as we have seen, either downplayed or turned into negative characteristics. If included at all, Ajax is cast as a lesser Greek warrior, who is a cog in the Greek machinery of war. *TFOAC* has inherited these tropes from earlier cinematic receptions, as its version of Ajax testifies, elaborating on them by emphasising his unquestioning obedience and his brutish nature. A telling example is an interaction he has with Menelaus, who, enraged by Achilles' refusal to fight, vents his frustration by saying that he plans to commission a thousand songs to immortalise the Myrmidons' cowardice. Ajax replies: "As long as you aren't expecting me to sing any of them" (Episode Six). This 'metatheatrical' touch both alludes to the orality of *The Iliad* and has one of the epic's protagonists reject it. *TFOAC*'s Ajax is dismissive of the value of storytelling and its role in the construction of the past. The series thus positions him on the wrong side of history.

Ajax's dismissal of the power of stories is particularly ironic, given that this incarnation of the ancient Greek hero is a character in a series distributed via a streaming platform with global reach (at the time of writing, Netflix is available in over 190 countries).[54] Netflix does not disclose its ratings, or reveal which series its subscribers in different countries choose to watch, but the company's inclusion of this version of the story of Troy as a 'Netflix Original' in its catalogues increases the potential for "multinational" dissemination.[55] At the same time, it further undermines the long-held view that the Classics are elitist rather than, as in their original contexts, popular entertainment. The Classics have in the past benefitted from such discourses about the type of stories audiences

53 John Shelton Lawrence / Robert Jewett: The Mythic Shape of *American Sniper* (2015), in: Terence McSweeney (ed.): American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11, Edinburgh 2017, pp. 23–47, here pp. 33–34.

54 Countries where Netflix is available, Netflix.com. help.netflix.com/en/node/14164 [31. October 2022].

55 Ramon Lobato: Netflix Nations. The Geography of Digital Distribution, New York 2019, p. 70.

'should' be watching, not only because of the cultural capital they enjoy, but also because of their close links with the origins of cinema, and the new medium's emphasis on the educational benefits it could confer on audiences. Returning to the metaphor of Menelaus' desire to commission a thousand songs, classical stories available on streaming platforms are part of a large catalogue of offerings. *TFOAC*'s creator, David Farr, wanted to retell the story from "the Trojan point of view", in the belief that this would appeal to contemporary audiences disillusioned by ongoing conflicts around the globe and their impact on civilian populations.[56]

TFOAC offers its audiences a powerful 'us *vs* them' narrative positioning Greece as an imperialist power bent on conquest and subjugation and motivated largely by greed rather than honour. Nestor's claim in Episode Two that the assembled army is comprised of "Lovers and defenders of Greece"[57] rings hollow and by the end of the series has been proven to be blatantly untrue.[58] Ajax's portrayal in *TFOAC* is emblematic of the view that the Greeks are 'mad, bad and dangerous to know', and this is as much representative of the lower end of the social hierarchy as it is at the top. The series predominantly showcases the Trojan point of view, thus encouraging viewers to form what in Media Studies is known as "a positive affective disposition" towards the Trojan royal family and its people and a correspondingly negative one towards their attackers.[59] Giving the Greeks less screen time solidifies this impression. *TFOAC* further undercuts the Greek position by its brutal portrayal of Greek society. In Episode Two, an enraged Menelaus threatens the Trojans with dire consequences because they refuse to return Helen to him. His construction of them as a foreign 'other' owes more to Herodotus' pro-Greek narrative of the Persian Wars (490 and 480/79 BC), and fifth-century Athenian prejudices against the foreign invaders who burned their city and its sanctuaries in 480 BC, than it does to *The Iliad*. Then, as in modern times, crisis and war pushed older stories into new moulds that better fit contemporary needs and agendas.

56 Sarah Hughes: Enter the Wooden Horse. But This Time the Trojans Tell Their Side of Fall of Troy, The Guardian, 27 January 2018. www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jan/27/troy-fall-of-city-west-against-east-lovers-siege-homer-bbc-netfllix [29 October 2022].

57 Episode 2 at 00:12:87–00:12:89.

58 Felix K. Maier: "This was always a shabby war". Deheroisierung und Gender in Troy: Fall of a City, in: helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen 8.1, 2020, pp. 21–29, here p. 27. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2020/01/03.

59 T. K. Lee / M. A. Shapiro: The Interactions of Affective Dispositions, Moral Judgments, and Intentionality in Assessing Narrative Characters. Rationalist and Intuitionist Sequences, in: Communication Theory 24, 2014, pp. 146–164, here pp. 147–148.

Conclusion

Such transformative changes in fundamental concepts and societal values both demand and reward close attention. Shane Butler argued that we can use Classical Reception to closely interrogate "our whole discipline's raison d'être".[60] At the time of writing, scholars are working hard to foster healthy debate about why we study the Classics and their rich and ever-growing reception history. Engaging closely with popular receptions, such as films, television series, games, comics, novels and many more, forms an essential strand of this conversation. Examining the concept of heroism and the audience expectations associated with it across different media allows us to deepen our engagement with both the Classics and modern popular culture.

It is the mission of this book, and of the series *Helden – Heroisierungen – Heroismen* more generally, to explore the history of the concept of heroism and to illustrate its transhistorical path down the centuries. A necessary part of this process is the re-evaluation of ancient heroes and heroines. This includes de-heroizing them by focusing on the darker aspects of their narratives and actions. My own wider work within this research area examines the concept of heroism as it is portrayed in Greek tragedy and how is has been transformed in modern performance, both on stage and screen. As popular receptions of the genre of tragedy continue to proliferate, there are ever more connections to be formed and new case studies to be analysed (both screen receptions discussed in this paper date from the final years of the second decade of the new millennium). Such investigations allow classicists to keep their finger on the pulse of popular receptions of the Classics and on the public's ongoing relationship with these ancient cultures.

Working on transhistorical investigations of concepts like that of heroism allows classical reception scholars to engage closely with new theories and methodologies, borrowed from other disciplines. For example, my own work in this paper draws on Adaptation Studies and Comparative Literature. In the present issue, Vandewalle's work on reading video game heroes and cinematic heroes as a cross-media dialogue of narratives helpfully reminds us of the importance of pursuing our research across both ancient genres and modern media. The interweaving of such theoretical and methodological frameworks serves to enrich and deepen our work. It also allows us to draw closer to our fellow Humanities scholars and their research. Building closer ties with scholars in other disciplines is an important goal for Classical Reception as only then will our discipline truly become cross-disciplinary.

People have always been interested in heroes / heroines and their tales of achievement and tragedy. The Classics have contributed several famous heroes /

60 Shane Butler: Introduction. On the Origin of 'Deep Classics', in: Shane Butler (ed.): Deep Classics. Rethinking Classical Reception, London 2016, pp. 1–19, here p. 16.

heroines to this global cannon of stories. They and their receptions deserve to be enjoyed, but also to be closely investigated by each new generation of scholars, who can add new layers of analysis. The ancient tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides demonstrated the popularity and mutability of ancient Greek heroes / heroines by dramatizing their stories onstage. This process has continued down the centuries until the present. In these challenging times when the Arts and Humanities are under pressure, Classical Reception can thus help us answer our critics and demonstrate why the Classics are not only alive and well, but also more relevant than ever.