Introduction: Approaching Heroes

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"Assuredly uprightness schooled by adversity in time of sorrow affords a theme for praise. Had sturdy Ulysses seen no misfortune, Penelope would have been happy but unpraised."[1] These words were written by Ovid around 10 A.D., while the Roman poet was living in enforced exile on the coast of the Black Sea. His laments conveyed a very immediate aspiration: the hope to be allowed to return to Rome and his old position. As classicists and guest researchers of the Collaborative Research Center SFB 948 "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms", we would nevertheless claim that Ovid's lines possess a timeless quality and are as relevant today as they were two millennia ago.

According to the *Compendium heroicum*, the existence of any heroine or hero (we will henceforth use the generic latter term) is insolubly linked to their realisation. Heroic figures are the products of social communications and specific circumstances. If nobody is telling the story of Ulysses and Penelope, then there can be no audience to look up to their praiseworthy example, and hence the heroic figures can never come into being.[2] Without Ulysses' dangerous journey and Penelope's onslaught of suitors, both could have been heroic merely *in potentia*. Their heroism emerges only in and through the practice of keeping the immediate dangers they are faced with as well as their own despair in check: a dual agonality of heroic defence against external influences, but also of internal heroic endurance.[3] A quiet life would have left Penelope *felix sed sine laude*, in an unpraised and unchallenged happiness that neither requires nor produces heroism.

Heroes are not simply made; their stories have to be retold anew to allow each audience across time to make meaning of them. Heroes can thus rise and fall, but they can also be understood only in the context of their (changing) backgrounds and constellations. Our research in this volume focuses on examples from the 21st century cinematic reception of classical antiquity, in other words, on ancient heroes in very recent films. The available material is highly rewarding for this kind of analysis, but we are aware of challenges on the way ahead. We will have to equip our readers with a large variety of contextual information on the classical tradition, on media and cultural history, on individual films, on developments in (and the "language" of) antiquity in cinema etc. This also means that our

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[1] Ovid, Tristia 5.5.49–52 (transl. A. L. Wheeler): "scilicet adversis probitas exercita rebus tristi materiam tempore laudis habet. si nihil infesti durus vidisset Ulixes, Penelope felix sed sine laude foret."

[2] Tobias Schlechtriemen: Constitutive Processes of Heroic Figures, in: Compendium heroicum, 2022, DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/kphfe1.0.20220819.

[3] Claudia Müller / Isabell Oberle: Enduring, in: Compendium heroicum, 2022, DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/due1.0.20221107.

path will not always be a straight one. There is a very good reason, for example, why readers should know about the male protagonists of late 19th and early 20th century circus shows if they are to gain a better understanding of superheroes and, in turn, classical heroes on screen. Classical reception can be an equally inspiring, demanding and rewarding subject, even more so when addressed with a sound theoretical basis and a truly interdisciplinary approach. We therefore invite you to follow us, even if the target may not always be in direct sight or around the next bend. Given the right circumstances, this may mean discussing Hollywood star cult, the United Nations refugee programme, and age differences between actors and their characters in order to contextualize heroism in a film that has not (yet) come into existence.

In the mid-2000s, Angelina Jolie was the definition of a successful lead actress. She had scored box office hits playing an archaeologist in two adaptations of the *Tomb Raider* video games, a sniper in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, and a demonic femme fatale in *Beowulf*. On top of her financial success, she had been nominated for her second Academy Award for the critically acclaimed *Changeling*. The yellow press loved how her roles seemingly intertwined with her personal life, for example when her secret agent love affair with Brad Pitt in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* was uncovered to be a real-life one as well. In hindsight, her role as the controversial Olympias in Oliver Stone's *Alexander* feels like a historical analogy for Jolie's own role in the machinery of movie star cult. Under these circumstances, it hardly surprised anyone to hear announcements that she was about to star in and produce a new *Cleopatra* film. Jolie and Pitt lived a very public life, with public attention also focussed on their children born in or adopted from African countries. You could practically hear marketing specialists starting up their engines: who better to play the larger-than-life Egyptian queen than this larger-than-life celebrity?

A good 15 years later and *Cleopatra* is still in the making. As we write this, a release in 2025 is considered realistic – in all likelihood, this date will have been further postponed by the time you read this book. From an ancient historian's point of view, the casting of Jolie would introduce an interesting new age difference: actresses portraying Cleopatra tend to be younger (often a lot younger) than the historical figure was during her reign, while Jolie will be closer in age at 50 in 2025. Even if the film were never to be made, however, it could still tell us a lot about film and its classical heroes. One might start with the immediate connection drawn by countless commentators between Angelina Jolie and Elizabeth Taylor. Of course, the 1963 film *Cleopatra*, in which Taylor portrays the Egyptian queen, is by no means the first film on the subject nor the last that would be produced over the following decades. The attraction of the parallel apparently lies in the status of the actresses and the degree to which they are associated with this particular role. Both actresses were tabloid favourites in their time, and the very public relationship between Elizabeth Taylor and her *Cleopatra* co-star Richard Burton seemed like a blueprint for Jolie and Pitt, including broken marriages and ugly divorce stories in both cases.

Today, any kind of femme fatale image would no longer be transferred unquestioningly from real life to screen (anti-)heroine – if only because the *#MeToo* movement has made some discourses less acceptable than they would have been at the start of the millennium. Furthermore, Jolie and Pitt parted ways years ago. Jolie has reshaped her image as a caring mother, an activist for women's rights and for breast cancer prevention treatment, and has expanded her activity as ambassador for the United Nations refugee programme. Even if the script for the *Cleopatra* project had not changed between 2010 and 2025, Jolie's "mother of Egypt" portrayal could never have remained the same. Heroes on the screen are never just heroes of the screen but are just as much a result of the actor's persona, cultural circumstances etc. Raising awareness of these factors, their complexity and their interconnectedness is one of the main purposes of our book.

For over a century, the medium of film has been extremely influential in constructing heroic narratives, and it will probably continue to be so for quite some time. Films and TV series are, in a way, the historical dramas of the modern age. The adventures of popular cinematic heroes reflect political upheavals, conflicts, crises and expectations, but also provide strategies and solutions for current problems. Heroic narratives styled as a form of conveying history appear to be particularly effective. The past is a foreign and often confusing world. Personalising history makes it possible to depict political developments or epochal upheavals as less determined by complex social circumstances than by single heroic individuals. For this reason, historical narratives do not represent the aesthetic expectations of the time in which they are situated. Rather, they are the projections of later times and their specific political, economic, cultural, and social interests.

All of this makes the study of classical heroes on screen a highly dynamic field of research and constitutes one of the reasons for the specific outlook of this edited volume. The project originated in an online workshop on heroizations in 21st century cinematic antiquity, held in December 2021 as part of our Fellowship as Visiting Scholars at the Freiburg Collaborative Research Center SFB 948. At that time, our approach was twofold: firstly, we wanted to connect to and interact with current discourses and controversies concerning heroes and heroizations. Therefore, we decided to focus on the so-called Third Wave of antiquity on screen (from the year 2000 onwards), and cast as wide a net as possible from mythological films to theatrical adaptations, from series to parodies, in which the entire range of the typology of heroic figures and heroizations is represented. Secondly, the focus on film as well as on antiquity enabled us to discuss relevant thematic complexes of the SFB 948 in an exemplary form.

The results reflect the nature of this dynamic process, and so does the character of the book you are reading now. The following chapters are bound together by a shared interest in the origins, mechanics and effects of a cinematic classical hero. The authors refer to the same concepts and continue a shared discourse which our workshop also contribute to. Some films will be discussed in different

contributions because our dialogue led us towards complementary perspectives. Other examples are introduced as counterpoints and amendments in later chapters. Furthermore, it seemed necessary to expand the horizon as we did during our exchange and include, among other factors, the transmission of aesthetics and narratives into different visual media. In this way, the chapters build on and complement one another. To this end, we had to divert from the common formula of a volume with a theoretical introduction, followed by the all too familiar case studies from a limited canon of Western blockbusters. Instead, we opted for an essay format which allows authors to continue, enhance and deepen the workshop discussions in written format. Only a few of the contributions focus on individual films, while most discuss certain structural, pedagogical or theoretical aspects. Some look back at film history to explain the genesis of modern hero narratives. Others take a fresh look at familiar examples with new methodological tools gained from the joint discussion. The essays are as diverse as their authors' backgrounds, which also accounts for some variations in style and even length of the texts. The result is nevertheless far from arbitrary. It may be possible to read just a single chapter, but like listening to only one statement in a dialogue, you would lose most of its meaning. We hope that our readership will appreciate the result in the same way we do now that the volume is close to completion: as a 'workshop 2.0' in written form, which will hopefully lead to a continued exchange about new perspectives on processes of heroization in film.

The construction of heroic figures and their evaluation, the heroization practices, the appeals of heroic action, and the heroes' competence in solving conflict are examined from three points of view: In the first section, Georg Eckert (Freiburg) raises the question of the political relevance of heroic figures by analyzing the treatment of political leadership in heroic narratives. The way heroic figures in film are shaped by tradition, but also by other genres, is the topic of Torsten Caeners' (Duisburg-Essen) essay, whereas Luis Unceta Gómez (Madrid) examines the reciprocal relationship between classical heroic figures and superheroes. The didactic potential of heroic films for use in secondary education is explored by a team of authors led by Wolfgang Hochbruck (Freiburg).

The essays in the second section deal with the fact that heroic figures are often confronted with different types of non-heroic or unheroic behaviour, representing competing value systems and agendas. Using Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* as an example, Silvester Kreisel (Flensburg) tackles potential ambivalences in the status of alleged heroes. Krešimir Matijević (Flensburg), referring to the series *Rome*, addresses the force of attraction of 'has been' heroes. Anastasia Bakogianni (Palmerston) concentrates on broken heroes, bridging ancient and modern experiences of war. Nils Steffensen (Flensburg) analyses the agency of non-heroes and the influence they can exert on hero narratives, using Oliver Stone's *Alexander* as an example.

Finally, the essays in the third section are concerned with the aesthetics of cinematic heroization practices: their relation to different types of heroic figures

and their dependence on historical context as well as media genres. Alexander Vanderwalle (Brussels) focuses on the reception of heroic representations in ancient film in computer games. Martin M. Winkler (Fairfax) examines stylistic codes and conventions in two representations of the founding of Rome. The volume concludes with a coda by Martin Lindner (Göttingen) which seeks to link the essays together. Moreover, it opens up several perspectives for further research into cinematic heroes, for which the essays of this volume may be used as starting points.

One of the realities of any continued conversation is that participants – or their role – can change in the process. Some may become more active only at a later stage. This is exactly what happened with Silvester Kreisel as well as Wolfgang Hochbruck and his team, who made the transition from guests at the workshop to co-authors of this volume. Others may be unable to stay on board the whole time for a variety of reasons. We were sorry to lose, for example, the contributions by Kerstin Droß-Krüpe on ethnicity in hero narratives, and by Thomas Tode on the 'infantile' tendencies of classical epic films. Others were already about to be published, such as Monica Cyrino's contribution on gender roles, now part of a new anthology co-edited by herself and Antony Augoustakis (*Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City*, London 2022). Finally, even if a participant steps back, the impact he or she had on the discussion continues during the following steps. We invite you to retrace such effects, e.g. on the subject of body image and gender roles, which found their way into several essays in this volume. In addition, many of the above-mentioned colleagues continue to engage in the discussion and give helpful input – just not in the form of a book chapter.

Every period, every society, every individual has their own take on hero worship. We write these lines at the end of 2022, three years into a global pandemic with millions of victims, and almost one year into Russia's attack against Ukraine. We are talking about heroes in the national health systems and about the heroic acts of aid workers remaining in a war zone. In doing so, we agree that heroism does not require the killing of an adversary, but our discourse is still one of fighting: fighting an illness, against inhumanity, for the victims etc. "Assuredly uprightness schooled by adversity in time of sorrow affords a theme for praise. Had sturdy Ulysses seen no misfortune, Penelope would have been happy but unpraised."[4] We probably see this passage from Ovid's *Tristia* in a different light than we did ten years ago (or maybe will in ten years' time). As researchers, however, our duty is the same it has always been: to understand in each case what constitutes the struggle, the making of a hero und thus the reasons for his or her praise. Heroes live on through the retelling of their stories, and new stories may require new methods to analyze and contextualize them. Millennia after they came into being, the narratives of ancient heroism still draw crowds, with movies, documentaries, and TV series being the most popular examples. If you are interested in the how and why, we invite you to join us and our contributors as we now start approaching the classical heroes in 21st century film.

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[4]   See Fn 1.