



Reception Studies, Classics and Film

Everyday Life in Athens and Rome (HPHP4020)

What is Reception?

“[RECEPTION] ...studies of the reading, interpretation, (re)fashioning, appropriation, use, and abuse of past **texts** over the centuries, reception-theory the theory underpinning such studies.” - Charles Martindale "reception" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Ed. Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth. OUP 2009.

- Where to draw the boundaries and limits? Temporal limits? – cultural limits?
- Myths of Trojan wars – Aeschylus, Euripides?
- Menander and “New Comedy” – Plautus?



Casa dei Dioscuri, Pompeii



Reception in Film

- Divisions in study of films (Jon Solomon 2010):
 - “**Ancient**” – films set in antiquity
 - “**Thematics**” – films dependant on ancient themes
 - “**Allusives**” – films containing specific classical allusions





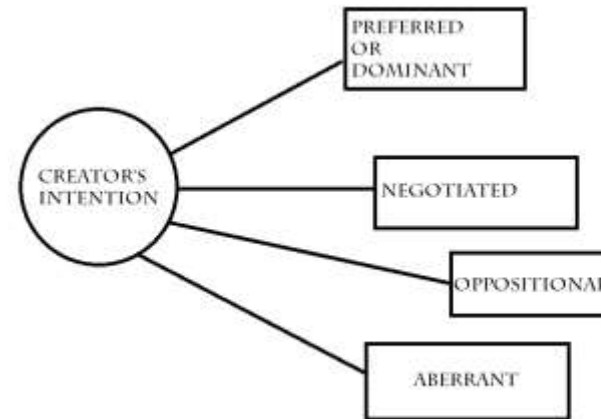
Why Reception Studies?

“The changing responses to antiquity can be seen as strategies for mediating cultural change and (re)negotiating relationships with the past which are significant for the receivers (so, e.g., Virgil was used in the Renaissance to justify princely rule or in the 19th cent. to underwrite British imperialism).” - Charles Martindale "reception" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Ed. Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth. OUP 2009.

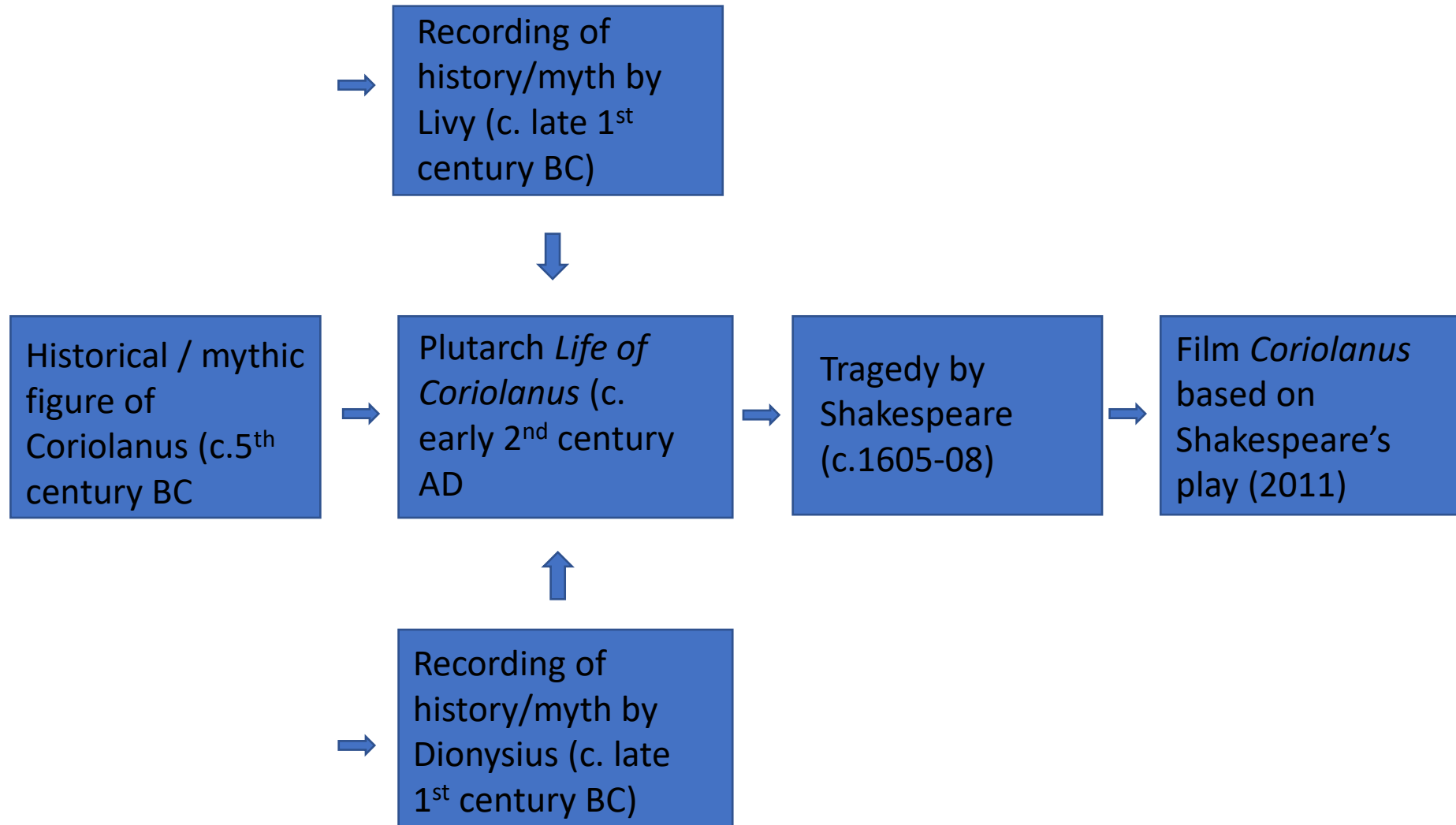
- **Influence** - How has the ancient world influenced our view?
- **Use** - How certain authors / people have used certain texts, art, heritage, etc.?

Reception and Theory

- “**Positivist**” - examine and explore what the author thought / believed / preached / advocated. What can we understand about the society the author lived in?
- For **Reception Studies** – not a focus on the author or the time in which the text is produced, but rather on the interest is in the Reader or Receiver.
- **Receiver:**
 - Reader/receiver can be anyone over 1000s of years. But you need to define who this is! [“(un)intended audience”].
 - Extreme approach? – no meaning beyond subjective response, can never discover “meaning”.



Coriolanus: An Example



Medieval Period – Myth as Authority



Who might Virgil be referring to? And how might a Christian thinker read this?

“Muses of Sicily, let me sing a little more grandly. Now the last age of the Cumaean prophecy begins: now a new race descends from the heavens above. Only favour the child who’s born, pure Lucina, under whom the first race of iron shall end, and a golden race rise up throughout the world: now your Apollo reigns. He will take on divine life, and he will see gods mingled with heroes, and be seen by them, and rule a peaceful world with his father’s powers.” – **Virgil *Eclogue 4***.

Renaissance period

- Study of Classical Antiquity providing erudition and nobility.
 - Renaissance man.
- Botticelli, Birth of Venus, 1455 (upper image).
- Wall painting from the Domus Aurea – Grotesque art (lower image).



Neoclassical period?

- **Neoclassicism** – visual, architectural, literary and performative arts.
- Rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum.
- The Grand Tour.



Admiralty Arch, 1912



Arch of Titus, Rome, 1st C AD



Arc de Triomphe, Paris 1806

Neo-mythology



- Adaption of myth to contemporary settings.
 - Bringing ancient myths into “present time and space” (Cheryl Rose-Hall).
- Neo-paganism, New Age myths, *et al.*
- Present in a variety of popular media.

SERIES TWO

A group of people, including a man with curly hair and a woman, are shown in a museum setting. The image is overlaid with a blue and orange gradient. The text "Graeco-Roman Antiquity and Popular Culture" is prominently displayed in white.

+
◦ Graeco-Roman Antiquity
and Popular Culture



Historians write history in reaction to the present, and potentially (re)constructions the past are informed by present concerns.



“Producers” of culture, high and low (esoteric and popular), create something in the present by selecting and adapting aspects of the past to contemporary concerns.



What do our representation of the “Greeks” and “Romans” say about us?

To what extent should
historicity be
subordinated to
entertainment or vice
versa?



In ancient Rome, it was tough for the guys who
worked in the vomitoriums to get dates.

- What is an acceptable level of accuracy and in what medium (cartoons, movies, novels, TV)?
- How much can we claim to know about the “reality of the Classical world”?
- Misinterpretation may be necessary, for example to make the joke work.

Does it matter if popular culture dictates the general understanding of the ancient world?



- Veneer of “respectability” for TV and movie producers?
- Differing priorities – authenticity and plausibility vs. modern audience’s expectations (verisimilitude).
- Kathleen Coleman and the movie *Gladiator*.
 - “Kathy, we need to get a piece of evidence which proves that women gladiators had sharpened razor blades attached to their nipples. Could you have it by lunchtime?”
 - Common sense may not be helpful for sifting “fiction” from “history”.

Troy
(Wolfgang
Peterson,
2004):
00:17:47-
00:19:12

Menelaus: I want her back

- **Agamemnon:** Well, of course you do. She's a beautiful woman.
- **Menelaus:** I want her back so I can kill her with my own two hands. I won't rest until I've burned Troy to the ground.
- **Agamemnon:** I thought you wanted peace with Troy.
- **Menelaus:** I should have listened to you.
- **Agamemnon:** Peace is for the women ... and the weak. Empires are forged by war.
- **Menelaus:** All my life, I've stood by your side, fought your enemies. You're the elder, you reap the glory. This is the way of the world. But have I ever complained? Have I ever asked you for anything?
- **Agamemnon:** Never. You're a man of honour.
- **Menelaus:** Will you go to war with me, brother?

[Agamemnon and Menelaus clasp hands in agreement.]

Transition to Agamemnon alone with his advisor, Nestor]

- **Agamemnon:** I always thought my brother's wife was a foolish woman but she's proved to be very useful. [...] Old King Priam thinks he's untouchable behind his high walls. He thinks the sun god will protect him. But the gods protect only the strong! If Troy falls, I control the Aegean.

300 the comic mini-series by Frank Miller (Lynn Varley: art).
5 issues in 1998



300 (Zack
Snyder,
2006)



Panem – *panem et circenses*



<https://youtu.be/2T481yh1KiY?si=QQ1yX1a4FMup-iKk>



Reception in Film

Ancients

Films set in the Ancient world

Thematics

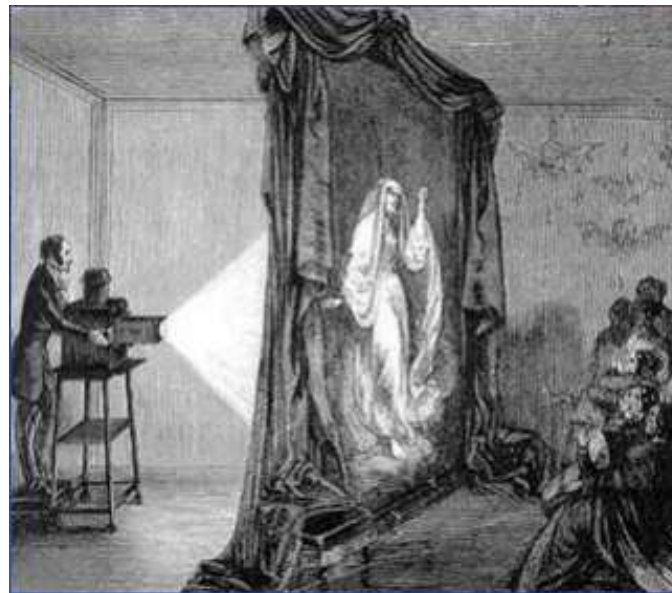
Films set in the modern world but following an ancient theme

Allusives

Fiction that alludes to the ancient world (directly or indirectly)



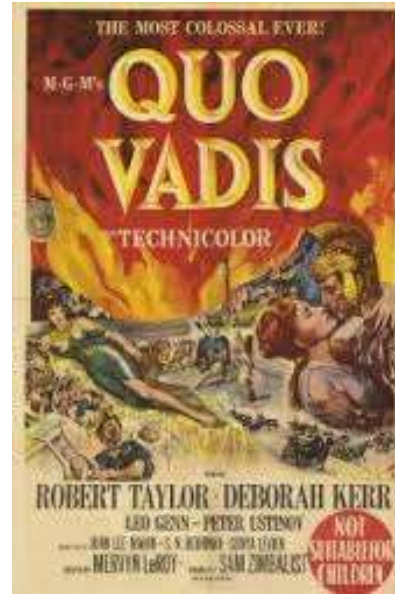
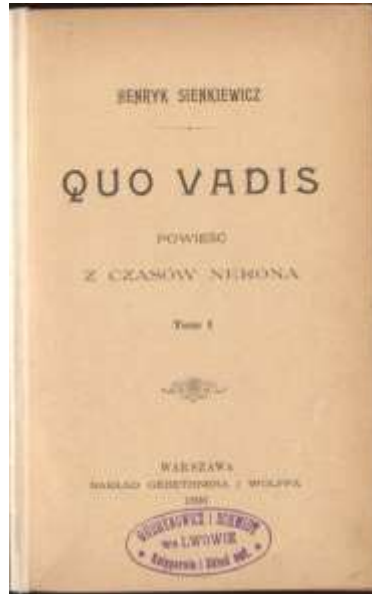
La caduta di Troia (1911)



Marble Heart
– 1913
(unknown
director)

Three Waves of Reception

- 19th century precursors:
 - Shadow shows / Magic Lantern Slides
 - Panorama / Diorama
 - Theatre
- **Silent Films ; Toga Films ; Modern Revival**



Toga / Pepla Films

- Post-World War II – Heyday in 1950s.
- Many based on 19th century religious novels.
- Decline resulting disastrous film?
 - *Cleopatra* 1963; *Fall of the Roman Empire* 1964.



Modern Revival

- Fantasy films (1970s and 1980s).
- Growth of Classical reception in television.
- TV revival (*Hercules the Legendary Journey*; *Xena*).
- *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott: 2000).