The Hero Reloaded

The reinvention of the classical hero in contemporary mass media

EDITED BY
Rosario López Gregoris
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Introduction

The main aim of this volume is to study the different means of adapting the figure of the ancient hero to new mass-consumption formats. The authors of this book[1] have directed their attention to the hero because, together with gods, it is one of the greatest creations found in Classical thinking. Unlike gods, the hero still survives and remains vigorous in the contemporary Western imaginary – albeit he is adapted to new cultural forms.

The hero archetype was originated in Ancient Greece as a need to bring order out of a monstrous universe (Heracles, Theseus, Jason, Perseus, etc., Zeus or Poseidon's – his brother – sons, were in charge of the disorganised forces of nature, symbolically described as wild beasts). It also served to put into effect divine plans assigned to a given nation or community (as in the cases of Achilles, Odysseus or Aeneas himself, who were tribal heroes and warriors).[2] All of them are born as heroes and as such they die; they lack the power of refusing their heroic fate, which is usually represented as a travel metaphor.

In mythical vicissitudes in which all those characters appear, there is a combination of two elements that are highly attractive to the contemporary society: adventure and fantasy. They allow the inclusion of the hero in every type of feat and also their continuity as an arrangement of series, as in the case of the Labours of Heracles or Theseus. Those labours keep the hero busy during various heroic episodes (a typical characteristic in contemporary formats such as television, films or comics). This modern phenomenon, the combination of an endless series of adventures, exerts effects both in the future and in the past; this deserves, in our

1. The seven pieces of work that comprises this very book were originated thanks to the papers authored by some members of the research team *Marginalia. En los márgenes de la tradición clásica*, under the direction of Dr. Rosario López Gregoris (FFI2011–27645). They were delivered at the VI Congreso Andaluz de Estudios Clásicos (VI Andalusian Congress of Classical Studies, 5th–11th May 2014), held in Málaga, on 8th of May 2014. All the papers tried to show the presence and use that contemporary mass media make of the Classical hero as a proof of his vitality and validity today.

2. For an approximation to the definition of classical hero, please see: Joseph Campbell: *The Hero with Thousand Faces*, Pantheon Book, 1949; Lydia Langerwerf & Cressida Ryan: *Zero to Hero, Hero to Zero: In Search of the Classical Hero*, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Gregory Nagy: *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, Harvard University Press, 2013.

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opinion, to be highlighted and thoroughly analysed. Lastly, there is a third element with which the modern world deals differently and that, in comparison with gods, characterises the figure of the ancient hero: his vulnerability and, hence, his impending death. Those are the cases of Heracles, Achilles and the rest of mythical heroes, although the accounts of the last days of some of them are not preserved today. Nevertheless, this vulnerability (even for the most powerful heroes) is transgressed in new mass formats in which, if necessary, the hero will resurrect to please the consumer. This resurrection will be performed by resorting to new technologies, temporal transpositions or more banal subterfuges – as the use of simple trickery – that leads to the hero's perenniality. He is not immortal but perennial … as long as he is popular.

All of those peculiarities and nuances already observed in the re-elaboration of the modern hero led us to write this monograph about the presence of Classical heroes in some contemporary class media – by means of which popular culture is displayed today.

The main aim of this work is to help understanding the reception of heroes that inhabited Classical literature and art in contemporary media and formats. Those means of communication are designed to entertain the audience. In the case of videogames, they are directed to young people: most of them do not usually have an academic background in Graeco-Roman classics, although they are very much attracted to a series of characters whose – conveniently updated – virtues and deeds are very appealing. It is, therefore, a way of including the Classical past within modernity and, at the same time, a way of creating insights from a brainstorming session that goes beyond the individual analysis that proposes each section.

The first essay, "From hero to superhero. The update of an archetype", by Luis Unceta Gómez (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), focuses on the analysis of the superhero in comics and graphic novels, comparing his characteristics to those defining heroes from the Classical world. Through this comparison, the author demonstrates not only that both present concomitant traits and perform a similar function in their respective fictional universes, but that the contemporary superhero must be understood as an updating of Classical heroes which, indeed, constitute the superhero's origins. To carry out his study, the author explores a concrete case, *El héroe*, by the Spanish strip cartoonist David Rubín – a particular revision of the Twelve Labours of Hercules –, by means of which he demonstrates the way in which form imposes a number of traits in its archetypical characters, superheroes, which are projected on a well known Classical hero as, for example, Hercules.

The next work, "Metamorphosis of the mythical hero in Disney's *Hercules*", by Antonio María Martín Rodríguez (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), analyses the changes underwent by one of the main Greek heroes, Hercules, in the rendition by Disney (1997). To perform this study, the author examines the creative process behind the Disney film, its structure, the adaptation of Classical sources and the elements taken from old mythological films such as *Superman* and *Star Wars*, and from previous Disney productions. This work also analyses the influence that this contemporary version of a Greek hero exerted over other cultural products and how certain differences in the storyline when compared to the canonical version of the myth may have been caused by the type of audience to which it was aimed.

The third work, "Κλέα ἀνδρῶν: Classical heroes in the heavy metal", by Helena González Vaquerizo (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), deals with the themes and motifs of Classical tradition in a quite particular contemporary music genre: Heavy Metal. This presence is explained thanks to the coincidences observed between Classical heroes and the ideology and aesthetic values that underlie this type of music. To confirm this, the content of diverse songs is analysed and, from them, the author extracts the different hero-patterns that can be cut down to three kinds: epic heroes, tragic heroes and adventurous heroes.

Meanwhile, "The videogame hero in his labyrinth: The hero in electronic gaming", by Cristóbal Macías Villalobos (Universidad de Málaga), establishes the different typologies of main characters in the most popular videogames from the last years – to wit, heroes, villains, anti-heroes – and seeks for connections between those same characters in the Classic arena. It emphasises that, given the interactive characteristics of this type of format, It is the human being, the player, the one who will incarnate the heroic virtues that embellish the virtual hero. In the end, everything will depend on the player's experience and skill to emerge as victor or to face defeat.

The fifth of the works, "Horrible deaths, grotesque deaths: Inversion of the heroic model and construction of the reader-viewer", by Jesús Bartolomé (Universidad del País Vasco), analyses the changes that the heroic model undergoes when the hero, instead of winning victory or suffering a glorious death, is defeated or dies "inappropriately" according to this type of character. Two excerpts from epic poems in Latin are analysed: Lucan's *De bello ciuili* 6, 138–262 and Silius Italicus' *Punica* 2,189–210. Both comprise Scaeva's *aristeia* and Asbyte's death, who was a Punic warrior, and they are compared to the grotesque deaths appearing in the TV series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010–2013). From this comparison, it is concluded, among other things, that the processes in charge of describing violence are pretty similar among Classical literary works and TV series – although the more grotesque aspects are displayed on the figure of the villain in the series while the hero usually comes off well.

Under the premise of the ductility of the Classical myth, "Oedipus in Manhattan: from Sophocles to Woody Allen" by Leonor Pérez Gómez (Universidad de Granada), analyses Woody Allen's film adaptation of the mythical Sophoclean story of Oedipus, *Oedipus Wrecks*. It is one of the three short stories included in the film *New York*

Stories (1989). In this film, the main character, Sheldon, played by Allen himself, is a Jewish lawyer who tries unsuccessfully to run away from his demanding mother. This is why, as the title suggests, the main character is involved in a "wreck" as happened with Classical Oedipus: trying to avoid it, he meets his fate.

This volume ends with an analysis by Rosario López Gregoris (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) about *Fun Home*, a graphic novel by Alison Bechdel. It focuses on the identification of the main Classical sources and their function. *Fun Home*, published in 2006, details – in terms of an autobiographical narration – the relationship between Alison and her father Bruce Bechdel, a repressed homosexual tormented because of his sexual orientation. This work is a combination of biographical elements integrated into a comic, and contains a large number of quotations related to literary and visual works. It has also been awarded several prizes, some of them related to the LGBT community. With regards to the Classical world, references are found in the first and last of the chapters. They have to do with the Cretan myth of Daedalus and Icarus, including some references to Minotaur and to Odysseus' travels. Those last travels have been extracted from Homer's *Odyssey*, although they are related to Joyce's *Ulysses*, whose protagonist, Leonard Bloom, is an anti-hero. In essence, the Cretan myth helps Alison Bechdel to convey the image of a perfectionist, narcissist and maniac father; Odysseus' adventures over the course of his travels become metaphors about the author's life, always in terms of sexual identity, whereas Joyce's *Ulysses* turns into a copy of Homer's work and its protagonist, Bloom, into an avatar of the author's father. This also serves as a reflection about the father's lack of heroism, that is, his incapacity to assume his homosexuality.

As seen, the works included in this volume illustrate the reception of the Classical hero in diverse media such as comic, Heavy Metal music, videogames, TV series and films. In all cases, the heroic Classical model has been able to successfully meet the expectations of an audience which is not familiar with the Graeco-Roman past – but used to consume dynamics to which the hero must adapt –, although this heroic Classical model had to undergo the pertinent adaptations and upgrading.

We are aware of the fact that the works that this book comprises do not avoid the general tendency – that is, the *mainstream* – imposed by large corporations that, thanks to their products, actually determine the consumer's taste. It is not by chance that Hercules has become a hero so widely consumed when compared to others that, *a priori*, could be more attractive to the occidental imaginary than Aeneas, held back due to unknown reasons. The sickly-sweet style in Disney films determines – excepting some formats such as comics – that the Western world must consume the mythical story of a hero, Hercules, whose adventures were originally brutal, although they have been conveniently infantilised to adapt to the children's (television) time.

Though, this very fact about the Western world consuming the same product and, hence, interpreting, in the same way, some hero's mythical adventures, conveys the idea of a prevailing uniformity in the consumer's taste independently from his or her origins. It also points out to the difficulty of introducing local and native products even from known heroes. In this book, the first work – by Luis Unceta – is the only one that analyses Hercules' presence in a national comic, David Rubín's *El héroe*. This comic does not escape from the general tendency although it manages, at least, to personalise a universalised product.

Yet another characteristic of the formats which have been analysed before is the connection between genres or intermediality, that is, the different formats of mass consumption talk to each other and to other popular products. This way they allow themselves to be permeated by contemporary references which do not really need to be linked to the original mythical story. Sagas or film series such as *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, to quote obvious examples, due to their powerful establishment, influence how should Classical heroes be (Jason or Hercules, without going any further). At the same time, the Classical heroic behaviour influences how a modern hero should be – as in the case of Luke Skywalker or Rey in the last episode of the film series, Frodo Baggins or Harry Potter himself. All of this entails a dialogue that is obviously conspicuous in the works included in this book. Heavy Metal lyrics neither avoid nor expect to avoid certain filmic iconography, as these products strengthen their diffusion by means of shared references – which are looked for and cultivated.

There is a last consequence that stands out in every modern hero adaptation, the hybridisation of genres. Maybe in Classical antiquity a Hero used to appear in epic or in tragical works – literary speaking –, but today heroes are to be considered representations, powerful icons that spread their presence to every format, from printed works, cinematographic images, computer screens, music to merchandising of any type of massively-consumed product. Though, we must clarify that Classical military heroes and the character of the heroin who assumes a traditionally masculine role do not receive the same level of attention. There are two glaring examples: Rey, whose presence in the market must be noted as low, albeit she is the indisputable protagonist in the last of the *Star Wars* episodes: *Episode VII. The Force Awakens* (J.J. Abrams, 2015) or Katniss Everdeen, who is the utter protagonist in *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012).

This easy access to the modern hero, independently of the format, develops one of the key characteristics in the reception of the Classical world: the democratic change. Classical heroes were the representatives of the ideology adopted by powerful warrior elites – a small group of (mainly) men that only intended and wanted to deal with their own sense, not with that of other collectives. This elitism, which was originally warlike and religious, was kept as artistic and intellectual excellence.

Indeed, this excellence has been recognised in the elite of hundreds of Western generations; an elite that has established what is to be included in the Classical canon and what is not, what must be admired and what is not. Those who accumulated a fortune or who achieved a certain social status that allowed them to be part of that elite are the ones who have kept the sacred role of the Classical tradition. Nevertheless, the eclectic, irreverent, impure and hybrid use that products designed for mass consumption with which tradition have been endowed, have allowed the public access to a certain understanding of the Classical world without the need of belonging to a specific intellectual or social class. This meant a fair diffusion of a series of highly aristocratic contents, and it has been even translated into the breakdown of a cultural paradigm. We, as experts on the Classical world, can regard it as suitable or not, but the current state of affairs needs to be explained and analysed employing tools in which comparatism and, above all cultural studies, offer from feminism and *queer theories* up to Classical receptions.

It is not untrue that the cultural influence is unambiguously exercised; the omnivore appropriation that the popular consumerism exerts over cultural products has a similar effect in assimilating forms and contents that have been traditionally associated to high culture. This way a popular format, like comics, may become a cultural reference product such as a book, precisely due to the powerful use of intertextuality in association with illustrations, recreating new forms of popular consumption which are highly intellectualised. This is the case of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home. A Family Tragicomic* (2006) in which the knowledge about some of the most important books from the Western canon is key for the heroin's sexual and emotional journey to self-knowledge. The permeability of mass media and the awareness of the transgression of the limits lead to the very authors to look for new denominations for their products. They reluctantly accept the term "comic", and they have created lexical associations such as comic strip, comic book, graphic novel or graphic album in which a high culture term is combined with a low culture one – if one accepts those denominations in order to illustrate the social tension that this combination implies, and its eloquent desires to improve.

This comic strip also leads us to reflect on the male predominance in modern heroes, probably looking for a male consumer and relatively forgetting about heroins from the Ancient world. This male supremacy follows the market logic – above all in some well-spread media – but this tendency is changing step by step. The market is now aware of the fact that the typical consumer's profile has broadened, and it is also aware of the women's economic empowerment. This last point requires a feminine presence in which the female consumer will be reflected, and which dispels gender stereotypes. In fact, this is the case of the recent adaptation of *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017), but also of other animated films or adventures aimed at children and youth, whose heroines do not have any type of trouble defending their position physically (*The Hunger Games*, Gary Ross, 2012) or even facing monsters and ghosts (*Coraline*, Henry Selick, 2009)[3] demonstrating bravery and determination – characteristics that have typically been masculine in the patriarchal imaginary of the Western civilisation.

The opening to other types of audiences allowed the interpolation of other sexual orientations in some of those new formats. Thanks to feminism, and above all *queer theory*, the analysis of the hero goes beyond the masculine stereotype, which is heroic and overprotective. Now it becomes a reference for gay audiences, displaying hypersexualised aesthetics in some cases (*Spartacus*, or Ralf König's comics; these last works focus on the idealised and "gay friendly" Athens),[4] or a reference for other sexualities or orientations, as in the case of Bechdel's comic strip which deals with the homosexuality of a father and his daughter.

This graphic novel offers, apart from that, an additional trait which is conspicuous in the way of appropriation of the Ancient world, the heroic trivialisation – that is, it is not necessary to have any type of special power or a disguise that individualises the main character in order to point him or her out as hero or heroine, as heroism is part of everyday life, the life of many people that undertake everyday deeds in their vital wandering comparable and compared to those of Odysseus, Telemachus or any other wandering hero from the Ancient world. Thus, the presence of Classical heroes in this comic strip serves two clear purposes: travelling as a metaphor for self-knowledge – in this case, sexual orientation – and knowing about parent-child relationships, and the effort put in bestowing prestige to the protagonist's heroism when compared to Classical heroes by means of a new democratising message: heroism is built up.

As a conclusion, there is a last observation to make: each piece of work in this book constitutes a study case; still, the volume needs to be read from the beginning to its end for the sake of obtaining a transversal point of view, formed by the characteristics that we have gathered in this introduction.[5]

The editors

3. The examples from the Classical world that lie under these films are, respectively, the Amazon myth, the mythical story of hunter goddess Artemis and, in *Coraline*, katabasis or a trip to the underworld as a metaphor of the journey from childhood to adulthood.

4. Specially his rewriting of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (1987, Rowohlt), which must be considered as an intertextual appropriation of a classic work that creates a *queer* re-reading. This allows the author to raise contemporary questions as the normalisation of gay culture in modern societies.

5. We are grateful to Zoa Alonso Fernández, lecturer at the Department of Classical Philology of the UAM, for her thoughtful remarks about this introduction.

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From hero to superhero

The update of an archetype

Luis Unceta Gómez
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

This paper offers an analysis of the interpretative keys of the character of the superhero in comic books, in comparison with those of the hero of Classical Antiquity. It is not only that both characters come to play similar functions in their respective fictional universes, but there is also a genetic link between the latter and the former. And this relationship is two-way, since this dependency determines the contemporary rewritings of the ancient hero in comic books. Taking *El héroe* (*The Hero*), by the Spanish scriptwriter David Rubín, as a case study, this paper tries to exemplify that relationship, according to which an ancient hero such as Hercules immediately evokes the typical features of the superhero of comic book.

Keywords: classical hero, superhero, comic book, classical reception, *El Héroe*

Classical tradition and comics?

Talking about popular representations of Antiquity necessarily implies posing questions about the legitimacy of certain formats to deliver consecrated contents, or about the boundaries between high and low culture. We must first consider that the difficulty of these distinctions lies in their purely conventional nature, and, by doing so, we cannot ignore issues as the complexity of the relationship between high and low culture, or the arbitrariness of the inclusion of certain creations into one or another of these labels, dependent on cultural institutions. Consider, for instance, the regard of the *bande dessinée* in France compared to that of the comic in the USA or the *tebeo* in Spain. In fact, nowadays, Culture has become an industry and the major publishing groups intend to share in the authority of the traditional institutions. Regardless of where we place those limits, there is no doubt that popular culture has always been permeable to the hegemonic high culture.[1] It is also undisputed

1. Cf. Grafton, Most & Settis (eds) (2010: *s. v.* "Popular culture").

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that high culture in the West has been inextricably linked to classical Antiquity or at least to the idea that each era has developed about that glorious past, for purely cultural or social and economic reasons.

The last two centuries have seen the rise of new narratives and new artistic forms inevitably incorporated in that tradition and dependent on it. However, until recently, these demonstrations were not worthy of academic interest, especially by the most conservative disciplines. In recent times, however, there has been a boom in analysis of these new formats, which in the field of Classical Studies has been carried out thanks to the efforts of the theoretical framework known as Classical Reception.[2] The point of interest of these studies lies not so much in the faithfulness of the representations of the past to the idea that scholars have of it, but in the engagement of the present with the classical past, and in the ways in which past and present – that of any era, including our own – establish a dialogue.

The comic book is one of those recent formats from which we can obtain important information about the current ideas of classical Antiquity and its endurance. In this case, unlike for example, cinema, which seems already acceptable for this type of analysis, we are faced with the obstacle of the widespread discrediting of the medium, which is attributed to defects such as the lack of depth in its proposals or its immaturity, charges that turn it into a product only suitable for children or an illiterate public. Many works, especially since the eighties, belie those prejudices, which ultimately spring from the ideological persecution that this medium underwent in the fifties, reaching its zenith with the publication of the work of the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). In this book, Wertham argued that comics corrupted young readers, by instilling violent and depraved values. The impact of his ideas pushed the comics industry to acquire a code of ethics, the *Comics Code Authority*, based on the Hollywood Production Code of 1930.[3]

It seems unnecessary to defend the relevance of the study of this medium at present, when there is a work awarded a Pulitzer Prize and numerous museums have presented exhibitions devoted to it. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that due to its hybrid nature, in the gap between visual arts and literature,[4] as well as to the peculiarities of its language, the graphic narrative is a privileged point of arrival

2. See Hardwick (2003), Hardwick & Stray (2008), or the papers collected in Lowe & Shahabudin (2009).

3. On the crusade against comics, its effects on the medium and the resulting self-censorship, see Petersen (2011: 159–162).

4. On graphic narrative and comics as literature, see Chute (2008).

for the confluence of literary and artistic traditions originating in the classical Antiquity.

Although there were a number of previous publications, the study of comics from the perspective of Classical Tradition and Reception have been largely encouraged by the publication of *Classics and Comics* (Kovacs & Marshall 2011) and *Son of Classics and Comics* (Kovacs & Marshall 2015). These inspired collections of articles clearly reveal that this medium constitutes a legitimate link in the long chain of the Classical Tradition, offering a contemporary view of the classical past and certifying the validity of these models, which is even more important. In the prologue to the former, Kovacs (2011: 15) provides a methodological framework to approach the study of Classical Reception in comics, and notes different forms of presence of that past: "(1) passing references and cosmetic borrowings; (2) appropriations and reconfigurations in which classical models are displaced from their original context; and (3) direct representations of the classical world."

Comics on (Greco-roman) classics

A large number of intersection points between comics and classical Antiquity can be found. There are, for instance, numerous historical fictions, more or less well-documented, set in Greek or Roman Antiquity, such as *Alix* (Jacques Martin, 1948-) or *Murena* (Jean Dufaux and Philippe Delaby, 1997-). It is also possible to track the presence of the literatures of those civilizations in comic books, as it is clear in titles such as *Greek Street* (Peter Milligan and Davide Gianfelice, 2009–2010)[5] or *Lysistrata* (Ralph König, 1987).[6] Generally speaking, mythology has had a good fit in the medium since its origins, because of its established links with the fantasy genre. There are, for instance, many adaptations of Ulysses' adventures, such as those authored by Francisco Pérez Navarro and José M.ª Saurí Martín (*Odisea*, 1982), by Sebastien Ferran (*Ulysse*),[7] or the erotic version by Milo Manara (*L'Odisea di Bergman*, 2004).[8] There have even been rewritings that adhere to the paradigm of science fiction, such as the trailblazer *Ulysse* by George Pichard and Jacques Lob (1968), or *Le Dernier Troyen* (2004–2008), by Valérie Mangin, which combines the

5. Unceta Gómez (2012).

6. López Gregoris (2013).

7. (1) *La Malédiction de Poséidon* (2002); (2) *Le Chant des sirènes* (2003); (3) *Le Duel des prétendants* (2004). On these works, see Rodrigues (2004, 2006).

8. Rodrigues (2005: 159–164).

journeys of this hero with Aeneas' feats.[9] Finally, it is also worth mentioning the treatment of various pantheons, removed from their original contexts and combined into a single fictional universe, in the series *The Sandman* (1988–1996), by Neil Gaiman.[10]

However, if there is anything that this medium is known for, it is the creation of one of the most solid and stable archetypes of contemporary popular imagination: the superhero. As we are about to see, the contemporary reflection of the classical hero can be considered from several points of view and its effectiveness has been strengthened by the phenomena of transmediality in mass media, which have allowed superheroes to become icons, even for those who do not read comics.

The superhero genre

The superhero genre is undoubtedly one of the creations of the American popular culture with the greatest international impact. In its early days,[11] it results from the convergence of at least two previous traditions, whose combination produces a captivating mix of mysticism and positivism. On the one hand, the occultist fantasy, based on movements such as the Theosophical Society founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), and her epigones, such as Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) or William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.[12] These esoteric trends, which looked back at the ancient deities,[13] had a

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9. On the first one, Jenkins (2011); on V. Mangin's work, a part of the universe of the *Chroniques de l'Antiquité galactique*, see Unceta Gómez (forthcoming).

10. Both for its ability to create its own mythology, and for the presence of mythological or historical figures of Greco-Roman Antiquity, as well as its many literary references, this is a series that deserves an exhaustive study. Espino Martín (2002: 46–49), Pitcher (2009: 33–34), González Delgado (2010), Marshall (2011: 91–96), Strong (2011), the works in Burdge, Burke & Larsen (2012), Unceta Gómez (2013), and Zanón Fernández (2013) treat different aspects of this work.

11. On the origins and setting of the genre, it is worth consulting, among many other references, Knowles (2007: 31–111) or Petersen (2011: 133–151). On the definition of the traits of the genre, see Coogan (2007). Mackie (2007) explores the similarities between the ancient hero (exemplified by Achilles and Odysseus) and the modern one (Batman and Superman). Egolf (2007) provides an analysis of the archetype represented by Superman from the point of view of the Jungian paradigm.

12. Other authors of fantasy or science fiction literature were also members of this society, such as Bram Stoker (1847–1912), Arthur Machen (1863–1947), Herbert G. Wells (1866–1946), Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932) or Algernon Blackwood (1869–1951).

13. Knowles (2007: 18–19) considers this movement a sort of Neoclassicism. Its effects reach the Neopagan sects and the Wicca, very active nowadays.

great social impact in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a strong presence in popular culture, specially clear in pulp literature[14] – whose protagonists, on the other hand, largely defined the stereotype of the heroic character[15]–, but also in other authors acclaimed by posterity, as, for instance, Howard P. Lovecraft (1890–1937). And secondly, but with no less influence, the science fiction literature cultivated between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by novelists such as Jules Verne (1828–1905),[16] Herbert G. Wells (1866–1946) and Edgar R. Burroughs (1875–1950).

It is usually pointed out that the superhero genre starts in 1938 with the creation of Superman (*Action Comics* # 1) by Joe Shuster (1914–1992) and Jerry Siegel (1914–1996). Thanks to his superpowers, this character immediately became the paradigm of the all-powerful hero. And in that way, the hero immediately became superhero. As a result of this transformation, the popular heroes of pulp magazines definitely became closer to the paradigm of the classical hero, being also characterized by a supernatural force and other superhuman abilities, which resized their mythological traits.

The origin of the superpowers of these characters is varied and ranges from the alien nature of Superman, to scientific accidents of all kinds, going through genetic mutations that create a new kind of superhero. Given this trait, as Lucerga Pérez (2004) notes, all of them develop a human dimension, which is embodied in aspects such as the anodyne anonymity in the everyday life (the work of Clark Kent at the *Daily Planet*), the traditional family life (Spiderman's Aunt May), their relationships (platonic in many cases), or their "Achilles heel" (the kryptonite in the case of Superman).

Several scholars[17] have insisted on the link between the classical hero and the superhero, and have established the connection of the genre with the earliest traditional hero's tales, something that some cartoonists have also been aware

14. Publications such as *Amazing Stories* or *Weird Tales*, among many others, proliferated at the turn of the century and widely spread some topics of fantastic literature and science fiction.

15. Characters like the Scarlet Pimpernel (1905), John Carter of Mars (1912), Tarzan (1912), based on the legend of Romulus and Remus, the Zorro (1919), Buck Rogers (1928), the Shadow (1930) or Doc Savage (1933).

16. López Gregoris (2009) and Pérez Gómez (2013) analyze the classical element in the work of this author.

17. Like Reinolds (1992), Knowles (2007) – who distinguishes different superheroes archetypes, as the Messiah, the Golem, the Amazon or the Magician –, LoCicero (2008) or Nikolavitch (2011).

of, obtaining the best performances.[18] Many of the constitutive elements of these characters – understood as prototypical and not mandatory ones – strengthen that relationship. Besides the aforementioned superhuman powers, it is worth mentioning a few more identifying features: the name, the emblem, the uniform and the mask – that become the iconic representation of their personality[19] and safeguard the secret of their identity –, the use of technological or magical weapons that make them invincible, and the regular presence of a younger[20] companion and of an opponent, represented by the villain, which serves as a counterpoint and contributes to the creation of their identity.[21] Consider, for instance, the strength of Hercules, the iconic character of certain attributes, like the lion skin, Perseus' weapons, or the couple composed by Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*. The muscular and gradually sexualized representation of superheroes (Taylor 2007) has driven them even closer to the Greco-Roman iconography.

Superheroes are also defined by their mission and actions that, according to Lucerga Pérez (2004), fall into two basic categories: to defend, restore or maintain a previous order, as Superman or Captain America do; and, especially after the postmodern revision of the archetype, to establish a new order against degradation, based on universal moral principles and without regard to temporal powers, a demeanour that moves them closer to the paradigm of the civilizing heroes. Thus, as guarantors of a new world order, they can be perceived as models of conduct and embodiment of values and beliefs.

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18. Grant Morrison titled *Supergods* his personal history of superheroes. Very significant in this regard is the case of Jack Kirby, author of series like *The New Gods* or *The Eternals*, where he combines ancient mythologies with the principles of science fiction, and provides an euhemeristic explanation to the ancient gods as aliens or as post humans technologically advanced (Uría 2013: 171–177).

19. Cf. Coogan (2007: 27): "The superhero costume removes the specific details of the character's ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colors and design of the costume". See also Lucerga Pérez (2004).

20. This character, called *sidekick*, allowed homosexual resonances of some superheroes, something that Eco (2004: 272) prefers to interpret as "parsifalism". Many gay collectives have exploited this association. See also López Gregoris, this volume.

21. The majority of these features, however, have been subverted in the most radically postmodern comic, as defended by Lucerga Pérez (2004) through the analysis of the deconstruction of the paradigm of the superhero in *Watchmen* by Alan Moore (1986–1987), and *Batman: The Dark Knight returns*, by Frank Miller (1986). This author concludes as follows: "Por eso, el superhéroe que regresa, aunque se llame igual que hace cuarenta o cincuenta años, ya no es el mismo personaje. Actualizando los valores de las sociedades que lo recuperan es más oscuro, más complejo y con más fisuras. Representa a comunidades más abiertas y lábiles donde el nosotros es cambiante y más amplio." See also Parham (2005).

In fact, interactions between superheroes and contemporary political reality are not rare. The first issue of the series starred by Captain America, in which the hero faced Adolf Hitler, was published few months before the attack on Pearl Harbour (*Captain America* # 1, 1941). Much later, in 2011, after the attacks of September 11, Frank Miller published *Holy Terror* a graphic novel that deals with a superhero named Fixer against Al-Qaeda. Spiderman also appeared after the attacks on the World Trade Center (*Amazing Spider Man* # 36/2/2001).[22]

However, Umberto Eco emphasized an important difference between the mythical facets of these two kinds of characters, which affects the narrative configuration of their respective activities. In Eco's opinion, superheroes, examples of modern mythmaking, are characterised by their skills and behaviour rather than by the "mythical narratives" they carry out, that accumulate *ad infinitum*. The contemporary audience, which this author names the "civilization of the novel," is reluctant to the repetition of the same stories, so the main features of these characters are subject to the constant need to find new stories. In Eco's own words:

> Superman deve dunque rimanere inconsumabile e tuttavia consumarsi secondo i modi dell'esistenza quotidiana. Possiede le caratteristiche del mito intemporale, ma viene accettato solo perché la sua azione si svolge nel mondo quotidiano e umano della temporalità. Il paradosso narrativo che i soggettisti di Superman devono in qualche modo risolvere, anche senza esserne consci, esige una soluzione paradossale nell'ordine della temporalità. (Eco 1964: 235–236)

The contradiction caused by the fact that superheroes have to act, even if they must place themselves beyond the passing of time, is usually solved through the complication of the plots allowed by science fiction, which gives them the chance to go beyond the temporal order.

Nonetheless, Eco did not consider a narrative element, which brings closer the paradigm of the superhero to traditional tales: the mediating function in the reception of the myth of the hero accomplished by Joseph Campbell's work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). The effects of this book on the cultural industries increased from the eighties onwards, when Christopher Vogler, screenwriter for Disney, adapted the mythic pattern of the hero's journey to the realm of film, in his famous guide to screenwriting, *A Practical Guide to the Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1985), a seven-page pamphlet, which later was developed into *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (1992). Vogler's work has been used as a template for multiple scripts for different media. Thus, as it has been pointed out,[23] the influence of this essay on the heroic experience has shaped the expectations

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22. On the last one, see Segado Boj (2005).

23. Housel (2005), Rogers (2011).

of comic book critics, storytellers and audiences, whose reading is influenced by these patterns and who expect developments in line with them. The conditions imposed by seriality (monthly basis, strict deadlines) facilitate the adoption of this hermeneutic theory as a template for creating scripts, but also limit the narrative possibilities and creativity of the artists.

There are also a few studies[24] that illustrate the debts of many of these characters to mythology in general, and specifically, to Greco-Roman pantheons. Besides the use of characters directly transplanted from the divinities of various cultures, as for example Thor (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, 1962), or Hercules (by the same authors, 1965)[25] – both strongly influenced by the descriptions of their homologues in the ancient texts, although passed through the filter of science fiction (Uria 2013: 80, 100–119)–, there are also many superheroes with explicit or implicit mythological models. I will just mention some of the most obvious ones.

In the case of Superman, his philanthropy provides him with a messianic background, underlined both by his real name, Kal-El, with apparent Hebrew resonances, and by the concomitances of his story with the legends of Moses and Christ.[26] According to the narration of his arrival on planet Earth, a kind of space translation of the legend of the former, Kal-El is saved by his father Jor-El from the destruction of their planet, Krypton, by being thrown into space in a capsule, a sort of floating cradle. Once in our planet he was raised by the Kents, his adoptive parents. In addition to his saving interventions, his identification with Jesus Christ culminates in his death and resurrection process, also exploited through the use of religious iconography.

Wonder Woman (1941) is a heroine even more clearly rooted in classical mythology,[27] a feature strongly exploited by Cliff Chiang and Brian Azzarello (2011–2014), who give great importance to the mythological characters involved in her stories. Captain Marvel (since 1939; named Shazam since 2011), in turn, with his

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24. See Unceta Gómez (2007), Rodríguez (2008), Pitcher (2009), or Dethloff (2011), among others.

25. Hercules was created in the wake of the success of Thor; I will refer later to the former. And there are other interesting cases, such as Ares; Clinton Simms (2011) analyzes the character in *Wonder Woman* and in the limited series *Ares: God of war*, by M. Oeming.

26. Tallon & Walls (2005); Schenck (2005).

27. Her author, William M. Marston, showed great interest in Greco-Roman antiquity – he wrote the novel *The Private Life of Julius Caesar, or Venus with Us* (1932), which chronicled the erotic exploits of the young Caesar. About Wonder Woman, see Sanjuan Iglesias (2004) and Danna (2005). Stanley (2005) offers a detailed analysis of its various incarnations serving different ideologies: the erotic fantasies of the author, with a large presence of *bondage*, the feminist very idea of a warrior-woman (a concept obviously contradictory to a patriarchal society), or the violent re-eroticization (in a possibly homoerotic interpretation), as a lure to a predominantly male teenager audience. See also Peters (2003).

solar symbolism, amalgamates attributes of a series of ancient deities, set out in the invocation *Shazam!*: Solomon's wisdom, Hercules' strength, Atlas' endurance, Zeus' power, Achilles' bravery and Mercury's speed.[28] Similarly, especially in his original iconography, Flash is obviously inspired by the god Hermes. Marvel Comics also created a character named Elektra, designed in the image and likeness of the classical one,[29] and Hulk, who scientist Bruce Banner transforms into, is a rewriting of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (*Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Robert L. Stevenson, 1886, with many film adaptations), which ultimately begins in the myth of Prometheus, through the rewriting of Mary W. Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818).[30] Furthermore, some authors have noted a strong presence of the Gnostic philosophy in the genre, which emphasizes all those links and which, combined with the principles of Kabbalah, has been sublimated in the series *Promethea* by Alan Moore (1999–2005).[31]

To conclude: A round trip

For all the above mentioned reasons, the comic as medium, even without being one of the most consumed modern media, is an important and interesting catalyst of cultural icons (Stanley 2005: 165). Many of these expressions emancipate from their original setting to become independent, complex and multifaceted symbols. And the resurgence of superheroes in recent times has led to their full recovery for the contemporary cultural language.[32] The large presence of the archetype and its permeability have reversed the direction of influence and changed the way in which ancient heroes are represented in new media. Thus, the development of special effects, the birth of new audiovisual languages, such as the video game,[33] or the influence of other film genres, have changed the physiognomy of the classical hero in recent products of the cinematographic genre called digital postpeplum. A striking example is found in Perseus, main character of *Clash of the Titans* (Louis Leterrier, 2010), especially when compared to the same character in the original

28. Pitcher (2009: 29–30).

29. See Steinmeyer (1997) for a thorough analysis of this figure.

30. See Balló & Pérez (2009).

31. Cf. Kripal (2011), nuanced by Uría (2013: 29–58). About *Promethea*, see Sánchez Pérez (2015).

32. Since the September 11 attacks, superhero productions have multiplied. The fiction *Heroes* (NBC, 2006–2010) naturally raises the question: when a group of unstructured adolescents become aware of having superhuman powers, their use of comics as a way of creating an identity reveals a conscious relationship with popular culture (Pitcher 2009: 27).

33. See Macías Villalobos, in this volume.

film (Desmond Davis, 1981). Likewise, the archetype of the superhero is influencing the representation of the classical hero in comic books. *The Hero* (2011–2012) by David Rubín, a particular vision of the twelve labours of Hercules, provides us with an excellent and clear illustration of the phenomenon.

Hercules has always been a privileged character in popular culture – not in vain the role played by Steve Reeves in *Le fatiche di Ercole* (*Hercules*, Pietro Francisci, 1958) contributed to the success of the peplum film genre –. That influence, like the adventures of Ulysses mentioned before, has undergone different rewritings in comic book. Among other titles, it is worth mentioning the work of Paul D. Storrie and Steve Kurth, *Hercules: The Twelve Labors. A Greek Myth* (2007), the French series *Socrate le demi chien* (1994–, Joann Sfar and Christophe Blain),[34] or *La Gloire d'Héra* (1996), by Christian Rosy and Serge Le Tendre.[35] The film *Hercules: The Thracian Wars* (Brett Rattner, 2014) is also based on a graphic novel (Steve Moore and Admira Wijaya, 2008).[36]

David Rubín (Orense, 1977), one of the most renowned Spanish cartoonists at this time, conceived his graphic novel *El héroe* (*The Hero*)[37] as a postmodern pastiche, that does not shy away from anachronism[38] and in which a central role is granted to all the conceptual apparatus of the superhero. With this choice he sets up a very particular vision of the exploits of the illegitimate son of Zeus.

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34. Three volumes: (1) *Héraclès* (2002); (2) *Ulysse* (2004); (3) *Œdipe à Corinthe* (2009). The book chronicles the adventures of a curious philosopher dog, son of the dog of Zeus, and companion of Hercules, in the form of an ironic and iconoclastic Socratic dialogue (see Rodrigues, 2005: 153–159).

35. In two volumes: (1) *L'Homme le plus fort du monde*; (2) *À Mycènes!* On these creations, see Rodrigues (2003: 64–66).

36. On this series and its sequel *The Knives of Kush* (Steve Moore, Cris Boson and Doug Sirois, 2009), see Gellard-Goad & Bedingham (2014).

37. Several of his previous works have received various awards: *El circo del desaliento* (2005), *La tetería del oso malayo* (2006) y *Cuaderno de Tormentas* (2008). The success of *El héroe* has granted its publication in France (2012–2013, Rackham), Italy (2011–2013, Tenué), and the USA (2015, Black Horse). He also published another title inspired by the epic tradition, *Beowulf* (2013), in collaboration with Santiago García.

38. The autor explained it this way in an interview to Zona Negativa: "Lo que me pregunté al comenzar a escribir fue: Vamos a ver … si a nadie le parece raro que este tipo luche contra una hidra de ocho cabezas o un gigante de tres cuerpos … ¿por qué les iba a parecer raro que lleve puestas unas Nike? ¿O que anuncie coches, o que conduzca una chopper o use un reproductor de mp3 como parte de la estrategia para vencer a uno de los monstruos gigantes a los que se enfrenta? … Y eso sí, pese a todo, ambientado en la antigua Grecia, pero no en la que conocemos por los libros, sino en una que yo me he inventado, un universo nuevo y diferente que me permite trabajarlo y modelarlo a mi antojo con la intención de sorprender. Quiero, en todo momento, huir del rollo péplum." <http://www.zonanegativa.com/zona-negativa-entrevista-a-david-rubin-2/> [03/04/2019]

The action takes place in a fantastic ucronia, in which elements from Antiquity coexist with others belonging to our present (Hercules wears trainers and sunglasses, he drives cars and motorcycles, and he struggles with the Lernaean Hydra to the beat of David Bowie's "Heroes," with his mp3 player; Figure 1), and some others taken from the futuristic speculations of science fiction, which are evident in the representation of some characters. One of the most noteworthy cases is the goddess Hera, nemesis of the hero (Figure 2), who like her palace, has an alien and futuristic look, or the giant Geryon, a being of pure energy of extra-terrestrial origin, though there are many other examples. His pop style evoking the recreation of Miguel Calatayud (*Los 12 trabajos de Hércules* [*The Twelve Labours of Hercules*], 1972), with explosive colours, numerous onomatopoeia, and a large development of action with high doses of violence – especially in the second volume –, combines many self-referential allusions.[39] These references allow readings at different levels, depending on the comic expertise of the reader.

Figure 1. David Rubín, *El héroe* (vol. 2) © David Rubín/Astiberri.

39. The press has pointed out many of them. In the above mentioned interview, among others: *Dragon Ball*, *Astérix*, *The Ultimates*, *Astro Boy*, Jack Kirby, Frank Miller, Paul Pope, Osamu Tezuka, Chris Ware or the Spanish comic author Max.

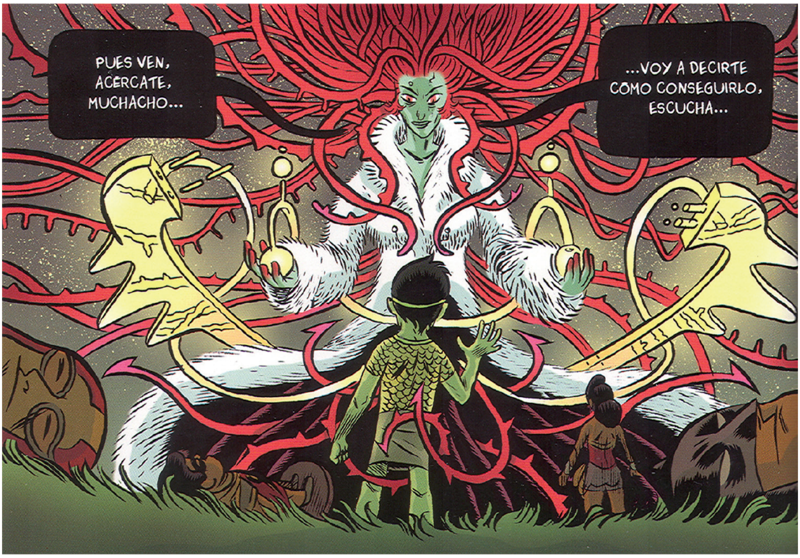

Figure 2. David Rubín, *El héroe* (vol. 1) © David Rubín/Astiberri.

Figure 3. David Rubín, *El héroe* (vol. 1) © David Rubín/Astiberri.

While it is clear that the author carried out extensive documentation work, this graphic novel is not intended to be faithful to the original story, as it introduces elements from other myths, or it alters the traditional order of different works, making the hero face the first of them at an early age (he defeats Nemean lion when he is only nine years old). This subversion of the story is, however, intended to serve the demands of a contemporary adaptation of the classical hero, who, in this medium, is necessarily interpreted through the filter of the superhero.

From the beginning (chapter 1, volume 1), references to superheroes are explicit (child Eurystheus plays with them, after a fight with Hercules; Figure 3), and the representation of Hercules presents continuous nods to the iconography of this archetype (Figure 1): from the skin of the Nemean lion, light as the cape of a superhero, to the emblem (at some point an H is shown in his belt), his close-fitting clothes and red underpants (in line with an ubiquitous presence of the iconography of Superman), to his superhuman powers, his way of fighting against his enemies,[40] or Iolaus' role as *sidekick* (the *erômenos*' passion is not hidden here). Not even the transmediality phenomena are omitted, since after his first victories, Hercules becomes a mass-mediatic hero:[41] he inspires the musical *Heracles vs. Hidra*, results in a line of toys, becomes an advertising strategy for different brands, and inflames the passions of a horde of fans.

Similarly, Prometheus is here a man condemned for his pride to an eternal punishment, but in this case, his crime consisted in trying to bring his wife, who died prematurely, back from the dead, for which the scientist insisted on different experiments. Once more, the mythical figure is recreated through the prism of his epigones and Prometheus is represented as a Dr. Frankenstein of Antiquity (Figure 4). The same is true of other characters, also tinged with this filter. Hercules' affair with Hippolyta, present in some sources, becomes a love story with the Amazon Diana who initiates Hercules in the pleasures of sex, including bondage practices, and gives him her magic lasso, which he will use in several civilizing exploits. All these elements establish a more than obvious link to Wonder Woman. It is possible to mention many more features, such as the emblem that wears Theseus: a bull's head, or the appearance of Nereus, a sea monster reminiscent of the Swamp Thing.

What is remarkable in this work is not the faithfulness or the lack of it to a given hypotext (although in this case, there could be several classical sources that exert such a function), given that it is precisely the distance from the hypotext which

40. With nods to classical gladiators fighting, as popularized by peplum films, videogame fights (explicitly in the final chapter of the second volume), or Mexican wrestling.

41. Just like in Disney's Hercules (see Martín Rodríguez, in this volume), influence not to be dismissed.

Figure 4. David Rubín, *El héroe* (vol. 2) © David Rubín/Astiberri.

favours the updating of the model. The interesting point here is the way in which contemporary languages generate avatars of classical heroes that enrich and amplify their tradition. In *El héroe* we also find an example of inversion of hierarchies, according to which the hypertext, the archetypal superhero, becomes the hypotext in this revision of the classical hero myth.

In the hyper-connected and multifarious contemporary culture – as shown by the way it organises the knowledge: the internet –, the creators have at their disposal multiple models and references, considered to be on the same level of relevance. These models impose cross-references running in different ways and allow the reversion of the direction traditionally attributed to Greco-Roman legacy: from the classical past to us.

The graphic narrative, free of any complex and cultural servitude, due to its negative consideration during the years, is one of the media allowing the most original remakes of the classic mythic archetypes. And undoubtedly, new pages of the ancient Classical Tradition are being written nowadays, thanks to these rewritings.

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Metamorphosis of the mythical hero in Disney's *Hercules*

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This essay analyzes the metamorphosis undergone by the ultimate Greek hero, Hercules, in the Disney film of that name (1997). Such a transformation is a keen example of the reworking of mythical hero figures in present-day popular mass culture. The essay focuses on the creative process behind the Disney film, its structure, the adaptation of classical sources, and on borrowings from earlier mythological films, from blockbusters such as *Superman* and *Star Wars*, and from Disney's earlier movies. Also analyzed are the ways in which *Hercules* may be seen as a parody of the conventions of Greek tragedy, the influence of this film on later cultural products (novels and movies), and the ways in which the intended audience may have influenced plot differences with the canonical versions of the life of Hercules.

Keywords: Hercules, Disney, classical tradition, popular culture, Superman, Harry Potter

1. Classical tradition and popular culture

Because of their archetypal nature, a good number of hero figures from multiple cultures bear a marked resemblance to one another; in our own context, in any case, heroes are largely derived from the Greco-Roman tradition. Our culture, indeed, is heir to both Greece and Rome, and the process by which that inheritance has changed over time is what we could call "classical tradition," since tradition is not that which we have inherited but the process of transmission itself (Cristóbal 2005).

We often illustrate the process of *tradition* by using the image of a torch that passes from hand to hand, but it is also possible to think of the ingestion of food. In this process, indeed, the nutriments of the foods we consume are broken down in our system and become part of ourselves, bound to be mixed with other nutrients we could eventually ingest (Martín Rodríguez 2015: 204–205). These two images

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are not incompatible; in fact, they explain two different modes of reception of the classical heritage: conscious and reflexive apprehension, which reproduces or elaborates on classical materials recognized as such, and unconscious apprehension, which preserves, reproduces, or transforms them without identifying them as such, since they have been fused already in the crucible of the collective cultural heritage. No examples are needed to illustrate the first type of transmission; the second, however, may not be familiar as such to many people, since the actual, direct contact that the metaphor of the torch conveys is difficult to perceive. Yet, the unconscious apprehension of the classical heritage is not unlike the presence of Latin in Romance languages; in fact, the difference between unconscious and conscious tradition is similar to that which distinguishes inherited Latinisms from cultisms willingly incorporated by individual speakers throughout the centuries.

As for literature, whereas the great classical genres have all but disappeared or maintained themselves firmly in the realm of high culture, popular culture restores and enlivens them, endowing them, albeit unconsciously, with new forms. Epic poetry, classical drama, and the cultured lyric poetry have, in fact, either disappeared, or become elitist manifestations; but, in their stead, novels, songs, and films flourish nowadays, bringing back to life some classical traits that the cultivated genres have abandoned. Such is the case with lyric poetry, which has lost its original ties (etymological and otherwise) with music as well as the ability to become the collective expression of a group's identity, as was the case with Greek archaic poetry. Modern popular music, by contrast, amply fulfills those two roles for groups of young people, especially, as far as the second of these features is concerned, and the same could be said of film, which recovers the musical aspects lost in modern theatre while maintaining in large part the didactic and even propagandistic role once fulfilled by Greek theatre.

Still, it would be a simplification to suggest a dichotomy opposing the learned and the popular traditions as conscious or unconscious reworking of prior hypotexts. A work of high culture may reproduce somewhat unconsciously classical elements and, on the other side, popular culture may consciously offer alternative versions of some classical-inspired subjects. A brilliant example of the former can be found in episode four of the fourth season of *Frasier* – the successful television sitcom – entitled "A Crane's Critique," first aired on October 22, 1996. The Crane brothers happen upon the manuscript of a famous writer's novel, and they bring to his attention several subtexts they discovered during their reading. Heart broken, the author flings his manuscript through the window, realizing that – unconsciously – he had rewritten Dante's *Divina Commedia*. On the other hand, examples of the conscious reelaboration of classical subjects in popular culture include the film *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (R. Lester, 1966), a comic parody that combines elements from various Plautine comedies (Martín Rodríguez

2005), and the modernized use of the tragic chorus and the Oedipal theme in *Mighty Aphrodite* (W. Allen, 1995). By contrast, the presence of characters reminiscent of the Plautine comedy in television series like *Cheers*, *Frasier*, and the Spanish blockbuster *Cuéntame cómo pasó* may be considered a case of unconscious use of the tradition (Martín Rodríguez 2012: 546–551).

2. Goals

I intend to analyze the manner in which mass culture consciously rewrites a Greek mythological figure by focusing on the animated film *Hercules*, released by Disney in 1997. To do so, I will discuss the type of sources employed by Disney, their reasons for consciously departing at times from the canonical version, the impact of this new version in the collective imaginary, the use of both themes and generic conventions, and, last but not least, a consideration of these new versions not only as the end result of a process of derivation from prior sources but also as inspiration for newer products as well.

As Spina (2008: 57) points out,

> … a new generation of *film philologists* has arrived on the scene. This generation, under the aegis of M. Winkler, will be essential for the survival and ongoing development of Classical Studies, especially if we remind us that traditional classical philologists tend to expend more and more of their time and efforts on ancient rather than modern cultures.

Nonetheless, as Lindner (2008: 39) suggests, although historical epics or blockbusters dealing with ancient mythology have received much attention recently, and they benefit from the current popularity of researching classical antiquity in the cinema, animated films have been widely ignored in academic research in this regard, perhaps because they tend to be seen as inferior products, since they are intended largely for the children's market. But, on the one hand, as Lindner brilliantly argues, "'children's films' means films produced *for* but only supposedly consumed *by* an under-age audience" (2008: 40); and, on the other hand, although these pictures obviously lack the complexity of most novels or dramas, they attempt nonetheless to introduce unfamiliar stories about ancient Greek history and mythology to young viewers, they constitute a non-negligible part of the overall phenomenon of "Antikenrezeption," and, "in all their simplicity, they offer an excellent opportunity for studying the principles of our modern reception of classical antiquity (Lindner 2008: 55)."

3. Disney's *Hercules*: A brief outline of its genesis and plot

As Renaut suggests (1997: 323), after two "serious" films (*Pocahontas*, from 1995, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, from 1996), the Disney studios wanted to reconnect with the tongue-in-cheek humor of *Aladdin* (1992). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that *Aladdin*'s directors, John Musker and Ron Clements,[1] were approached about developing the new product. In a "gong show" in early 1992 they were presented with a series of possible projects. Musker and Clements were tempted by two mythology-based possibilities, an area never before tapped for a feature film by Disney:[2] one was based on Hercules, and the other on the *Odyssey*. In the end, they opted for the former, which offered them better comedic options and more freedom to implement any desired changes.[3] In fact, as Blanshard (2005: 49) recalls, although Hercules was undoubtedly popular in the Greek world, the stories about his life were not the usual subject of tragedy. On the contrary, he appears in plenty of comedies, where his enormous appetite and his excesses were better suited. He seems particularly akin to the dramatic genre known as the satyr-play, in which he was probably the most popular figure (Spina 2008). In that sense, Spina (2008: 60 n. 12) offers a list of authors and satyrplays featuring Hercules, extracted from Krumeich et al. (1999). Though the Disney film may be seen as the modern heir of that genre, the same could not be said about the *peplum* even if Hercules, its most popular character, comes out as laughable at times, largely because that genre always takes the figure of Hercules seriously; the opposite is true of Arnold Schwarzenegger's character in *Hercules in New York* (A. Seidelman, 1970); cf. Lillo (2010: 104; 89; 101). On the other hand, in the *peplum* Hercules' divorce from his original adventures in classical mythology is total, as opposed to the satyr-plays (Spina 2008: 62). It seems, in any case, rather curious that Hercules' sidekick in Disney's film is precisely a satyr.

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1. They had also co-directed *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986) in collaboration with Burny Mattinson and Dave Michener, and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Later on, they co-directed *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

2. Mythology played a significant role in the short film *The Goddess of Spring* (1934), about the myth of Persephone, and in one of the segments of *Fantasia* (1940), devoted to Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*.

3. According to Ron Clements: "Hercules appealed to us partly because it didn't seem as sacred a thing as something like the *Odyssey*. We had to feel that whatever we chose, we would be able to take quite a few liberties …"; cited by Blanshard (2005: 164).

The popularity of the 1990s series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*[4] among the young adult audience may have played a role in Clements and Musker's decision as well, as they may have envisioned extending its success to a children's market (Solomon 2001: 123).

Both directors began developing the film (number 35 in the Disney Studios roster) in October–November 1993 (Rebello & Healey 1997: 52), after conducting careful research. Being also the script writers, something atypical of Hollywood's directors, especially in the animation field (Rebello & Healey 1997: 21, who explain their keynotes as scriptwriters as well), they engaged in separate research processes, comparing results afterwards[5] during an eight-month process of continued rewriting of storyboards, supervised by Don McEnry, Bob Shaw, and Irene Mecchi. Once the script was ready, Musker chose British illustrator Gerald Scarfe as Production Designer, famed for his political caricatures for London's *Sunday Times*, for his innovative designs for international opera productions and rock concert tours, for his surrealistic *Time* and *The New Yorker* covers, and for the anarchic animation sequences for the film *Pink Floyd-The Wall* (Rebello & Healey 1997: 84). In April 1995, the team travelled to Greece and Turkey; their task was to ensure that the film could combine three different elements not readily compatible: the Greek style, the Scarfe touch, and the Disney look (Renaut 1997: 323–324).

Hercules' plot may be summarized as follows:

1. A party to celebrate the birth of an heir

Mount Olympus celebrates the birth of Hercules, son of Zeus and Hera. Each god brings a gift, and Zeus has manufactured his: a small winged horse – Pegasus – fashioned out of a cloud. An uninvited deity, Hades, crashes the party with a peculiar *gift*: a spiked teething ring ("and here is a sucker for the little sucker").

2. A shady plan and a troubling prophesy

Ashamed by the mockery of the Olympian Gods, Hades goes back to the Underworld, where he consults the Fates about the future of his plan to overthrow Zeus. The Fates' rhymed oracle runs as follows: "In 18 years precisely, / the planet will align ever so nicely. / The time to act will be at hand. / Unleash the Titans, your monstrous band. / Then the once-proud Zeus will finally fall / and you, Hades, will rule all! / A word of caution to this tale: / should Hercules fight, you will fail."

4. Initially there were five films made for television, followed by a six-season long series (1995–1999). In the series, Hercules (played by Kevin Sorbo) is no longer a strongman as in the *peplum* but an attractive, blonde-haired slim man.

5. Rebello & Healey (1997: 53–54).

The plot simplifies Zeus' opponents by combining the two traditional types, the Titans (whom he defeated upon coming to power, as indicated in the Muses' first song) and the Giants (who would later rebel against Zeus and the Olympians).[6] As García Alonso (2002: 566) suggests, Hercules properly belongs in this Gigantomachia, as a participant. Moreover, the plot introduces another change: in the classical version, the Olympians realize that a mortal's cooperation is needed for their victory; in this version, it is Hades who realizes that mortal Hercules' involvement must be prevented in order for his plan to be successful. The scriptwriters, however, knew the original story, as John Musker's note on November 11, 1993 demonstrates.[7]

3. A child whisked away from Mt. Olympus and adopted by a couple of mortals

In consequence, Hades tasks his helpers, Pain and Panic – inspired, according to García Alonso (2002: 564), in the two assistants of Ares, Deimos ("Fear") and Phobos ("Panic"). As indicated in note 7, screenwriters had thought of Ares as a possible antagonist to Hercules –, with eliminating the baby, forcing him to drink a potion first that would make him mortal. They kidnap Hercules, then, but the arrival of a couple of mortals sends them fleeing when the baby is yet to drink the last drop of the potion. Amphitryon and Alcmena adopt the baby and they raise him as their own while, as the Muses dutifully explain, "Zeus led all the gods on a frantic search. But by the time he found the baby it was too late. Young Herc was mortal now, but since he did not drink the last drop, he still retained his godlike strength."

The contents of the bottle from which Hercules drinks are never revealed, but the incident appears to be an inversion of the motif of Hercules' breastfeeding by Hera: had she not removed him on time from her breasts, her milk would have rendered him immortal. In the Disney film, had Hercules drunk the last drop, he would have become a simple mortal. On the other hand, the scene of the sad parents searching for their lost son, combined with the ingestion of food that precludes the baby from returning to Olympus, appears to be an echo of the pomegranate eaten by Persephone in hell, which precluded her from returning to Olympus.

6. "In post-Homeric legend they rebelled against Zeus and the Olympian gods, who, learning that they would not win unless they were assisted by a mortal, called in Heracles" (Howatson 1989: s.v. Giants).

7. "Could climax of story be Hercules having to defeat Ares the traitor or some monster in order to get back to Olympus where the Titans are overrunning it. He must get there to turn the tide of battle in the gods' favour (*prophecy that the gods can't win unless aided by a mortal*)" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55, my emphasis).

4. A happy but misunderstood baby

Hercules is happy with his adoptive parents, although growing up he is ostracized by the other children because of his strength and his clumsiness.

5. In search of his destiny

As a young adult, Hercules' learns that he is an adopted child from his parents, and he leaves in search of his destiny. When he enters a temple dedicated to Zeus, the statue (inspired in Pheidias's lost masterpiece from Olympia) comes to life[8] and reveals his filiation. Happy to learn he is a god, Hercules wants to travel to Mount Olympus but Zeus explains that the potion has erased his divine condition almost entirely and, as a consequence, he would need to prove himself a true hero before the gods would admit him. In order to do so, he is advised to look for Philoctetes, the trainer of heroes (henceforth referred to as Phil). The horse Pegasus, which Zeus offers him, would be of great help in that regard.

As a result, the future deeds of Hercules acquire meaning, ceasing to be just a catalog of adventures. In that manner, the film is part of a tradition (already visible in classical antiquity) that invests the hero's actions with meaning, at times interpreting the twelve labors as atonement for the death of his wife and children, others – in a subtler manner – by having the hero encounter at a crossroad two ladies who represent pleasure and virtue, respectively, and who invite him to choose one way or the other. Hercules will choose virtue, an arduous road full of sacrifices that will mold him into a civilizing, benefactor hero.[9] Some even believed, as Diodorus' work shows, that Zeus slept with Alcmene only so he could conceive a hero to bring order to the world (Blanshard 2005: 33–34). In the Middle Ages, his deeds would be invested as well with symbolic meaning (Brumble 1998: 154–166, on the image of Hercules during that period).

6. The training of a hero

Retired and disillusioned – because of all the heroes he has trained whose careers ended in defeat – Philoctetes refuses to help Hercules at first, but the latter manages to convince him. Phil subjects Hercules to rigorous training, after which they leave for Thebes on a "road test." Thebes is, according to Phil, "a big town.[10] Good

8. The scene follows the logic of the ancient supplicant. Hercules prays to the statue of Zeus, and a series of natural phenomena suggests that the god has heard him. The only element missing is the offering that used to accompany the supplication.

9. Xenophon (*Mem.* II 1, 21–34) is the source for this anecdote, attributing it to Prodicus, the Sophist; see Ritoré Ponce (2009).

10. Its size, indeed, surprises Hercules ("Is that all one town?"), and Phil insists on its problematic and unique character ("One town a million troubles, the one and only Thebes").

place to start building a rep," and it is represented in the film as a large modern city that grows vertically, a sort of ancient Greek version of New York (Renaut 1997: 326), "like a big Manhattan kind of city," in the words of Ron Clements (Rebello & Healey 1997: 163), an identification emphasized by Phil's anachronistic joke, clearly intended for the adults in the audience: "The Big Olive Itself."

7. Boy Meets Girl

On the road to Thebes, as they are about to cross a river, Herc and Phil meet a horrible centaur trying to rape a girl. Disney had featured centaurs already in *Fantasia* (1940), and *Hercules'* directors had planned to include them one way or another in their story, as R. Clements's notebook (November 11, 1993) demonstrates: "We should use centaurs somewhere in the story" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55). In the film, after a fight, Hercules frees the girl, and he immediately becomes infatuated with her beauty and voluptuous figure.

8. The trap

Young Megara (Meg, henceforth) turns out not to be a "damsel in distress," as they thought, but a lost soul tasked by Hades with seducing the guardian of the river and turning him into an ally. When the girl mentions the name of her rescuer back in hell, Hades realizes that the only threat to his plans is alive. Since none of the monsters he sends against Hercules is effective, Hades decides to use the captive soul instead, promising her freedom to return to the kingdom of the living. Meg seduces Hercules, then, but she falls in love with him against her will.

9. The deal

Though betrayed by the woman he loves, Hercules makes a deal with Hades to free her: the hero will give up his strength for a day (the day planned for the attack, of course) in exchange for her freedom; but, should Meg suffer any harm, the deal would be off. However, it should be noted that Hercules agrees to the deal before knowing for sure about Meg's betrayal, an aspect revealed by Hades himself after sealing the deal by shaking hands with Hercules.

10. Hades' conspiracy

With Hercules out of the way, Hades frees the Titans (previously locked by Zeus in an underwater prison), and he sends them against Olympus, except for one of them who looks like a cross between the *Odyssey*'s Cyclops and a modern sumo wrestler. This one is charged with killing Hercules. While in classical mythology the Titans numbered twelve, six men and six women, Disney uses only three, as clear representations of the natural forces unleashed (fire, ice, and a typhoon). As suggested above, this number is inspired in the three Giants (Gyes, Cottus, and Briareos), the first generation of monsters engendered by Uranus and Gaia, who had been locked underground by their father.

According to the *Theogony*, the union of earth and sky produced three series of enormous beings: the Giants, the three Cyclopes, and the twelve Titans. The addition of a Cyclops – which may be understood as a case of *contaminatio* with Odysseus's story – is nonetheless justified, since the Cyclopes had been locked underground as well. Ironically, though, in classical mythology Hades is not the one who frees the Titans to topple Zeus; rather, it is Zeus himself who releases the Giants and the Cyclopes in order to defeat the Titans.

11. Breaking the deal

While the Titans conquer Olympus, Hercules – still deprived of his strength – cunningly gets rid of the Cyclops.[11] A column falls on Hercules but, risking her own life, Meg manages to save him, though she is left badly injured. The deal is broken, therefore, and Hercules – having recovered his strength – goes to the rescue of the Olympic gods. Meg, in the meantime, agonizes in the care of Phil and Pegasus.

12. A second deal with Hades

Hercules frees the captive gods, and he defeats the Titans, but Hades is about to get a consolation prize: Meg's soul, on the brink of plunging into the river of death. Desperate, Hercules rushes into the underworld, – "a rather magnificent variation on the original Greek labours, in which Hercules conquers death" (Solomon 2001: 124)–, and he proposes a second deal to Hades: his life for Meg's; if Hades allows him to attempt her rescue, the hero will willingly stay in the world of the dead.

13. The ultimate deed

Hercules plunges into the river of the dead searching for his loved one. His muscles get thinner, his hands and his face are full of wrinkles, his body ages … death is approaching, and the Fates are ready, scissors in hand, to cut the thread of his life.[12] But when his almost skeletal hand touches his lover's finger – a wink to the adults in the audience, who might recognize a veiled allusion to the famous fresco

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11. In the combat with the Cyclops, Santana (2012: 278) recognizes obvious parallels with the *Odyssey*, but also a reminder of the victory of Oedipus over the Sphinx, which also falls down an abyss by the gates of Thebes.

12. The Moiras cutting the thread of life had been featured already in some films with mythological plot lines such as *Arrivano i Titani* (D. Tessari, 1963; cf. Solomon 2001: 125), but the influence in this case seems unlikely.

of Adam in the Sistine Chapel –, the scissors bounce off the thread; and so, we learn that his willingness to give up his own life to save a loved one (and not his victories over monsters) is what makes him a true hero. Now, neither Meg nor Hercules can suffer any harm from Hades.

Interestingly enough, that is also the message in Euripides' *Herakles*, where the reflection on the value of heroism plays a significant role as well. The tyrant Lycus, for example, sees no value in killing beasts, and he argues that heroism, instead, is fighting for your city; and Theseus, at the end of the tragedy, convinces Hercules that there is more to heroism than fighting monsters: heroism resides in fulfilling the duties of friendship. Hercules himself seems to have finally understood this truth, when he declares: "What is worthwhile about killing a hydra or a lion, if I do not prevent the death of my children?" (Blanshard 2005: 48–51). This was, in fact, the main idea about heroism that the two co-directors wanted to convey: "That self-sacrifice, doing something for the betterment of the world, is more important than being the strongest guy" (J. Musker); "That, even if you're strong, famous, even an 'action figure', you're not ready to be a hero until you're doing things for the right reasons …" (R. Clements, cited by Rebello & Healey 1997: 190).

14. Apotheosis and the relinquishment of divine condition

A triumphant Hercules ascends to Olympus, whose doors are finally open to him. But, with Zeus's blessing,[13] the hero relinquishes his newly-acquired divine nature to spend his life with Meg.[14]

4. The sources

4.1 Primary mythological sources: Canonical versions of the life of Hercules

It is obvious that the screenwriters did careful research on the story of Hercules,[15] even though they had no qualms about making changes in order to make it more attractive for the film's target audience and more palatable for an eminently

13. Another wink to members of the audience familiar with classical culture, because Zeus' nod is equivalent to what the Romans called *nutus*, a concept related to *numen*, the divinity's consent to the request and, by metonymical extension, the divinity itself.

14. From the very beginning, the co-directors had considered a scenario in which the hero would give up immortality to spend his life with the woman he loved (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55). Santana (2012: 279) sees an echo of the *Odyssey* in this.

15. There is ample bibliography on the subject. The main ancient sources include Apollod. *Bibl.* II 4, 8–7, 8 and Diod. Sic. IV 8–39. Cf. Grimal (1982: 187–203); Gantz (1993: 374–466). For the conservative society upon whose approval depended the commercial success of the movie. In that sense, the film sweetens the canonical versions in areas such as the engendering and birth of Hercules; whereas tradition has Zeus taking up the appearance of Amphitryon to sleep with his wife (Alcmena), the film makes it clear that Hercules is the son of Zeus and Hera, and that Amphitryon and Alcmena are only his adoptive parents.[16] Still, some original elements related to the hero's early childhood are left undisturbed in the film version, such as the sending of two snakes (cf. Apollod. *Bibl.* II 4, 8), that the child dominates without effort. In the film, when Amphitryon and Alcmena find the baby, Pain and Panic become two snakes who try to strangle him without succeeding. This detail was in the directors' notebook since the beginning, although they were not sure about the specific shape it would take, mythic, comic, or both (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55).

Hera's role as archenemy and dispenser of monsters is played in the film by Hades, however, clearly an original election, as Lindner (2008: 43) rightly points out.[17] The directors had no clear idea at first of who would be Hercules' antagonist, though they wanted someone who could also be Zeus's enemy (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55); in the first stages of the screen writing, as noted, the directors considered Ares as well. Hades' leading animator was Nik Ranieri, who endowed the character with his own personality, as John Musker acknowledges.[18] According to Ron Clements, they thought of him "[a]s cool and sardonic, a wheeler-dealer type, maybe like a car salesman you'd see on TV or a Hollywood agent" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 163).

On the other hand, the child's education is transferred to a satyr named Philoctetes, a distant avatar of the centaur Chiron, the teacher of a considerable number of Greek heroes including Hercules, according to some versions. Phil, in fact, talking to his future student, brags in this way about his experience: "Who do

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evolution of the myth in its literary adaptations, see Galinsky (1972); on artistic representation, see Boardman et al. (LIMC: s.v. "Herakles"). Blanshard (2005) provides an entertaining and well documented "biography".

16. Solomon (2001: 124); Blanshard (2005: 164); Lindner (2008: 43); Santana (2012: 279). Because it is intended for a different audience (the teen television audience), in the almost contemporary series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* the hero is, instead, born out of wedlock, Zeus is a likeable and mature seducer, Alcmena is an honest single mother, and Hera, a harpy (Cano 1999: 34).

17. According to Santana (2012: 279), the scriptwriters took their inspiration from the *Marvel Comics* hero of the same name. That character is, indeed, the god of the dead, and he plots to overthrow Zeus, but his name is Pluto, not Hades.

18. "Nik Ranieri, like Hades, is tall, thin […] Hades' sleazy insouciance was even more wedded to Nik when we shot live action referent footage with Nik performing Hades. Except for the glasses and the lack of fire on his head, Nik was Hades" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 116).

you think taught Jason how to sail? Cleopatra? I trained all those would-be heroes. Odysseus, Perseus, Theseus. A lot of 'yeuseus'." The only reason for naming him Philoctetes appears to be a practical one, namely the opportunity to call him Phil, a familiar hypocoristic name for the American audience. Still, in Greek mythology Hercules and Philoctetes are connected by the episode in which the latter receives from the former the bow and arrows essential for taking Troy (Karazantza 1993). In *Hercules*, Phil is retired and only reluctantly agrees to train Hercules (thereby facilitating the future defeat of the Titans); in Greek mythology, Philoctetes lived isolated in the island of Lemnos, suffering from a painful, incurable foot wound, and it took all of Odysseus' and Neoptolemus'[19] persistence to persuade him to help in the Pan-Hellenic enterprise.

The great deeds of the hero, the quintessential twelve labors, are concentrated in the film in just one: the fight with the hydra.[20] The rest is glossed over in the song of the Muses (in a Greek ceramic background) and while Hercules poses for a portrait. Also, an allusion to the twelfth labor is visible in the hero's bursting into hell mounted on Cerberus to propose a second deal to Hades.[21]

In a wink to the informed viewer, as he fights with the hydra (the second computer-animated Disney character, after Aladdin's carpet, according to Renaut 1997: 331),[22] Hercules is swallowed by the monster but he manages to break through with his sword: this is exactly what he does in Greek mythology with the monster who swallows him up as he prepares to save Hesione.[23]

His love life, likewise, is concentrated on just one female figure, "a slinky and sultry redhead with a New York accent" (Winkler 2009: 92), who combines traits from both of Hercules' mythological wives: she inherits her name from Megara,[24]

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19. In Sophocles' version; in Euripides' it is Diomedes who accompanies Odysseus.

20. As Blanshard (2005: 113) suggests, "For artists, it seems that the 'Twelve Labours of Hercules' is really 'The Lion, the Hydra and ten others'"; the fight with the lion, in fact, appears in the background during one of the Muses' chants.

21. The inclusion of Cerberus raised some issues in the early drafts of the script: "Should we use the multi-headed dog?" (R. Clements's Note, November 11, 1993; Rebello & Healey 1997: 55).

22. According to Solomon (2001: 124), the hydra was modelled after the computer animated version in *Hercules and the Amazon Women*, a TV movie broadcasted in the United States on April 25, 1994.

23. "Heracles leapt into the open mouth of the creature and struggled for three days in its belly, slashing about with club and sword until at last it was mortally struck and he cut his way out" (Frye & Macpherson 2004: 324). The incident visually recalls the outcome of *Men in Black* (B. Sonnenfeld, 1997), released the same year. I owe this suggestion to Beatriz García.

24. In naming Herc's love interest after the wife murdered by Hercules in a fit of madness, Blanshard (2005: 164) sees "a move that stretches the limits of postmodern irony."

and the centaur episode from Dejaneira. At the same time, Meg is reminiscent of Alcestis, who offered to die in place of her husband (Admetus); in the case of Meg, as Hades reminds us: "You sold your soul to me to save your boyfriend's life. And how this creep thanks you? By running off with some babe." As mythological Hercules rescues Alcestis from Death, so Herc, when Meg dies, goes down to the Underworld to rescue her.[25]

According to John Musker: "We also wanted to give the thing an edge by doing a 'take' on it a little like great screwball comedy from the '30s and '40s, where you have an innocent leading man and a more worldly, femme fatale heroine" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 53); and Kent Duncan, lead animator of Meg, who designed her with sharp eyelashes and half closed eyes, explains that " … she has a definite attitude, like that of one of those quick-witted, brainy, assertive, feminine, independent actresses from '40s screwball comedies" (ibid. 109). For John Musker, Duncan's Meg is "funny, sharp, smart, sexy" (ibid. 108). Meg's figure, on the other hand, shows also – with her arms frequently cocked on her hip – a striking visual similarity with Greek vases (ibid. 142). Her usual sarcasm also makes me think of Ava Gardner in *Mogambo* (J. Ford, 1953).

4.2 Secondary mythological sources taken from popular culture (mythical theme movies)

It seems obvious that screenwriters were inspired by other films as much as they were by canonical mythological sources. Despite the great number of *peplum*-films which cast Hercules as protagonist,[26] their influence on the Disney movie appears to be minimal. There are some coincidences with P. Francisci's *Hercules* (*Le fatiche di Ercole*, 1958), the film that started the trend, and an extraordinary success since its American release in 1959.[27] These similarities include the tension between the human nature and the divine condition of the hero (which eventually he gives up) – in the wake of M. Camerini's *Ulisse* (1954), in which the hero refused the immortality offered by Circe –, as well as the motif of the crumbling down of a palace's columns before the hero is reunited with Iole to live a life of happiness (Lillo 2010: 91; 95).

25. Santana (2012: 279) proposes a different mythical subtext, the story of Orpheus.

26. According to Blanshard (2005: 160), in the decade following the release of P. Francisci's *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1958) more than 60 films were produced featuring the name 'Hercules' in their US or UK titles.

27. It was seen by 24 million people and made up to $18 million at the box office (Blanshard 2005: 158).

The most fruitful source is *Clash of the Titans* (D. Davis, 1981), from which *Hercules* takes the following elements:

- After crashing the party in Mount Olympus, Hades returns to the underworld in Charon's boat, represented as a skeleton, just as in *Clash of the Titans*;
- The Fates are represented as three repulsive old women who cut the thread of life of the mortals, and who possess oracular powers, which they exercise through the means of a magical eye that they use by turns. On the one hand, they are reminiscent of the Moirai, but the shared eye is an attribute of the Graiai, oracular divinities who advise Perseus. As Solomon (2001: 124) has suggested, inspiration for this particular characterization comes from *Clash of the Titans*;
- The winged horse Pegasus is connected in the classical myth to Bellerophon, but the association in *Clash of the Titans* is with Perseus, for which there was a reason in the classical tradition. In *Hercules,* the script writers now transfer the winged horse from Perseus to Hercules.[28]
- The underwater prison of the Titans, and their release by Hades appear to be inspired in the locking down of Kraken and its liberation by Poseidon in *Clash of the Titans*;
- The image of Zeus in *Hercules* is reminiscent of Laurence Olivier in that particular role in *Clash of the Titans*. According to production designer G. Scarfe, "I've always thought of Zeus as made of something extremely solid, very angular. I studied the statues at the British Museum and sat for hours in my studio in London poring over every art book I could buy" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 129). Visual influences, however, are usually unconscious. In fact, in a different animated movie of the same period, *The Invincible Hero Hercules* (1997), Zeus closely resembles Sean Connery; cf. Lindner (2008: 46). Inspiration in real models, sometimes for parodic effects, is well documented in Disney; in *The Goddess of Spring* (1934), for example, one of the illustrators for Persephone used his own sister as a model, and Eric Goldberg, who animated Rabbit in *Winnie the Pooh* – an arrogant animal, always angry, self-centered, and not very smart – admitted drawing his inspiration from Richard Nixon (Finch 2011: 124; 334). Rumor has it that the drunken clowns in *Dumbo* (1941), a film shot during a labor strike in the studios, bear a resemblance to the strike leaders.

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28. Solomon (2001: 124). It is worth noting that in a notable representation of Hercules at the Crossroads – Annibale Carraci's (1560–1609) painting of the same title – Pegasus is present at the end of the path to virtue.

Other details in the film may owe a debt to *Jason and the Argonauts* (D. Chaffey, 1963). In that film, and during the trials to select the Argonauts, young Hilas promises to throw the disc farther than Hercules. The latter throws it a considerable distance, but Hilas astutely beats him by making the disk bounce off the marine surface. This scene may be interpreted to dialog ironically with a comparable one in *Hercules* (P. Francisci, 1958), in which Iphitus, a whimsical, smug youngster, challenges Hercules into a disc-throwing contest, but the latter throws the disc so far that spectators cannot even see where it falls. In *Hercules*, when Herc is trying to show his innate abilities to the skeptical Phil, he grabs a gigantic disc which he throws with force to the water.

A second visual echo can be found in the scene in which Phil pinches the heel of a statue of Achilles, the best of his pupils, thereby making it crumble down like the giant Talos in Chaffey's film.

4.3 Modern "mythological" sources taken from the adventures of mass culture superheroes

We know that the directors of *Hercules* are great fans of science fiction, comics, and spy movies, as John Musker himself has acknowledged (Rebello & Healey 1997: 163). Ron Clements, in turn, admitted: "We were thinking of a kind of superhero – the first superhero" (Blanshard 2005: 164); and John Musker, in his November 1993 notebook confirmed this idea: "Herc as antiquity's superhero, prototype for contemporary sports superstar" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55). It seems reasonable, therefore, to think of Disney's Hercules as influenced by the ultimate superhero of our time, *Superman*,[29] as we will see in the following chart. I am referring specifically to the influence of the film *Superman* (R. Donner, 1978), not to the entire corpus of his adventures, that begun in 1938 in comic form. Still, it is interesting that Meg calls Hercules "Wonderboy," an ironic nickname that refers to the one adopted by Superman in the retrospective narrations about his childhood ("Superboy").

29. For an insightful analysis of the myth of Superman, see the seminal essay of Eco (1972). About the superhero genre, see Unceta Gómez, in this volume.

Planet Krypton, whose inhabitants are more powerful and perfect than men, is on the brink of catastrophe, which drives Superman's parents to send him – as a newborn – to distant planet Earth	Hercules, the son of gods, is kidnapped right after birth and taken from Olympus to Earth
His father makes sure that his son acquires as much knowledge about Earth as possible during his long journey there	Once on Earth, his kidnappers make him drink a potion that turns him human
The child keeps his superpowers – conferred by his superior origin – secret[a]	Hercules, under the guise of a human baby, retains a supernatural strength, as befits his superior origin
A childless couple, Jonathan and Martha Kent, takes him in, adopting him as their own[b]	A childless couple, Amphitryon and Alcmena, takes him in, adopting him as their own
A surprising event makes clear that he is not a normal baby	A surprising event makes clear that he is not a normal baby
His adoptive parents save some objects that will allow him later to learn his true origin	His adoptive parents save a medallion with Zeus' symbol that will allow him later to learn his true origin
Now a youngster, he is ostracized because of his antics	Now a youngster, he is ostracized because of his unbridled strength and his clumsiness
A second detail evidences his superhuman condition: a vertiginous race in which he passes even a train	A second detail evidences his superhuman condition: a vertiginous race pulling a hay cart
At the proper time, he leaves home and finds his real father, who reveals his origin and his destiny	At the proper time, he leaves home and finds his real father, who reveals his origin and his destiny[c]
He fights a powerful enemy who lives in the subway tunnels	He fights a powerful enemy who lives in the underworld
Despite his superhuman powers, he is clumsy around women[d]	Despite his superhuman strength, he is clumsy around women

a For an outline of these superpowers, see Eco (1972: 14).

b "The Disney animated film of *Hercules* regards Zeus *and Hera* as the parents of Hercules; Alcmena and Amphitryon merely adopt him when he falls to earth, just as Ma and Pa Kent adopt Superman" (Doniger 1999: 113). The place where the co-directors envisioned Hercules growing up looks very much like the one where Superman's parents lived, "a farm, like the Midwest" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 163).

c According to Santana (2012: 278), this scene is reminiscent of the myth of Oedipus when he leaves Corinth to visit the temple of Apollo in Delphi to consult the oracle.

d As Eco (1972: 18) notes, Superman shows "the bashful embarrassment of an average young man in a matriarchal society." About Disney's Hercules, see the last paragraph in section 4.1 above.

It could be argued that these similarities are due, in large part, to the archetypal nature of all heroes, but the coincidences in the sequencing of the plot are astonishing. At the beginning of *Superman*, Jor-El (Superman's father) plays a decisive role in the sentencing of three prominent conspirators who are jailed in a sort of flat prison house that is sent to space; in *Hercules*, we find a parallel in the Muses' singing about the subjection of the Titans by Zeus, Hercules' father. For different reasons, Kal-El (the future Superman) and Hercules leave their birthplaces and arrive on Earth while still babies and they are adopted by middle-aged couples who desired a child of their own.[30] Upon meeting their adoptive parents, both children demonstrate their superhuman condition: Kal-El (Clark Kent, after that) saves his adoptive father from being crushed by his own vehicle by holding it up,[31] while Hercules gets rid of two serpents sent against him by Hades (Pain and Panic in disguise). Both films then skip a few years, presenting their respective heroes again when they are almost eighteen years old.[32] Both are shunned by their peers and, in both films, a neck-breaking race takes place, to visually remind us that they are exceptional beings. In both cases, then, the heroes have a conversation with their respective adoptive fathers who try to lift their spirits. Next comes their learning about their true origin and their departure from home: Clark's adoptive father dies, the young man finds in the barn the ice needles with which he landed on Earth, and he sets out in search of answers about his origins; as for Hercules, Amphitryon and Alcmena show him the medallion with Zeus's name, which allows him to learn the name of his real father, after which he too leaves to search for his roots. Clark arrives at a desolate place covered in snow and he hurls a green ice needle, the most stunning of those he had brought with him to Earth.[33] The needle sinks down in the ice and a sort of building or temple emerges where Clark sees the image of his father, who explains who he is and why he is on Earth, instructing him to fulfill his mission of helping humans.[34] Hercules, in turn, arrives at a temple where the statue

30. *Superman:* "All these years, as happy as we've been, how I've prayed the good Lord would see fit to give us a child"; *Hercules*: "Amphitryon, for so many years we've prayed to the gods to bless us with a child".

31. We find a subtle echo of this incident in *Superman* in one of choral songs in *Hercules*, where we see (in the background) a stunned Amphitryon watching Hercules lift his house (with Alcmena inside) to retrieve a lost ball.

32. According to the prophesy, Hercules must be eighteen years old at the time of Hades' conspiracy, and Kal-El's father tells him (during their first meeting) "By now you will have reached your eighteenth year."

33. The Disney animators probably took their cue from this vivid-colored needle to design the bottle that turns Hercules human.

34. "It is now time for you to rejoin your new world and to serve its collective humanity. Live as one of them, Kal-El, and discover where your strength and your power are needed." A background of Christian allegory surrounds the figure of Kal-El and his relationship with his father. For instance, the father tells Kal-El: "For this reason, above all, their capacity for good, I have sent you,

of Zeus comes alive,[35] explains who he is and why he is on Earth, suggests who to train with in order to fulfill his mission, and gives him Pegasus as a helper.[36] The main difference between the two stories is that Kal-El's training is conducted by his own father while Zeus delegates to the satyr Philoctetes the training of Hercules.

Once their training is complete, both heroes prove themselves by helping others. On his first day on the job at the newspaper, Clark Kent saves Lois Lane from a mugger, while falling in love with her. Likewise, Hercules at the onset of his "trial period" saves Meg from the centaur Nessus, falling in love with her as well. In *Superman*, this is followed by the introduction of the antagonist, Lex Luthor, who lives in a mansion within the subway tunnels – an allusion to the underworld of mythology – assisted by Miss Teschmacher and the inept and ludicrous helper Otis. His penchant for irony and wordplay, and his domineering yet peevish relationship with Miss Teschmacher bring Luthor very close to Disney's Hades and his relationship with Meg. In fact, Luthor exploits Miss Teschmacher's charms in a manner not unlike that which Hades uses with Meg: Miss Teschmacher, scantily clad, feigns an accident to distract the members of a convoy escorting a dangerous missile so that Otis can manipulate it; following Hades' instructions, Meg attempts to seduce Nessus to win him for his conspiracy. Otis may be seen as the model for Pain and Panic, their dual nature notwithstanding.

After saving Lois from the mugger, Superman performs a greater deed, saving her from a helicopter accident; several feats later, Superman's image is in all newscasts. The equivalent sequence in *Hercules* would be his fight with the hydra, followed by subsequent feats that make him an extremely popular character. In both cases, their actions are surrounded by humor.

Infatuated with his success, Superman meets again with his father, who understands his euphoria but advises restraint. Hercules meets with his father, too, after his first string of successes, thinking himself a true hero,[37] but his father disabuses

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my only son," and he specifies the time that Kal-El's training will take: "By the time you return to the confines of your galaxy 12 of your years will have passed"; those twelve years, added to his age (eighteen) comprise thirty years, the age when Jesus Christ began his public preaching and his miracles.

35. García Alonso (2002: 564) proposes as influences for this visit to the temple of Zeus the myth of Phaeton and the film version of Superman.

36. Once this meeting is over, Hercules flies out of the temple riding Pegasus, not unlike Superman did in the film; for the latter, the unmistakable uniform and cape serve the same purpose as the winged horse does in the animated movie.

37. In *Superman*, the hero's joy is more contained (*Father*: "You enjoyed it." *Superman*: "I don't know what to say, father. I'm afraid I just got carried away"); Hercules, by contrast, sounds like an exhilarated braggart ("You should have been there, Father. I mangled the Minotaur, grappled with him and counsels restraint.[38] All this is followed by Superman and Lois's meeting in the balcony of her apartment, whose equivalent in *Hercules* is his conversation with Meg by the pond.

Lex Luthor realizes that Superman may foil his plans: modifying the course of two missiles to provoke the sinking of the coastal areas of California so that the inland, desert lands he has been purchasing could became the new coastline. Informed that Superman's weak point is kryptonite, he manages to lure him to his underground dwelling where he places a necklace of that metal on the superhero, making him lose his strength; attracted by Superman, however, Miss Teschmacher removes the necklace, giving him back his strength. Hades, in turn, knows that Hercules is the main foil for his plan, and he manages to weaken him precisely on the day in which the Titans are going to attack Olympus; but Hercules regains his strength, thanks – indirectly – to Meg.

Luthor has managed to manipulate two missiles out of control to make sure that Superman – should he succeed in freeing himself – could not stop both of them at the same time. Indeed, the hero succeeds in diverting one missile into space, but he cannot avoid the impact of the other against a dam, which provokes a cataclysm in which Lois dies; while he was out saving the world, the woman he loved died and he could not save her. Letting out an anguished scream, he flies out, orbiting at great speed around the Earth, thereby reversing time and thus saving Lois from death. In *Hercules*, the hero sets out for Olympus to defeat the Titans; after accomplishing his mission, he returns to the woman he loves, finding her dead. He descends to hell in despair, jumps into the river of death and manages to revert time so that Meg's spirit can be reunited with her body.

Phil, on the other hand, appears to be based on Yoda, from *Star Wars*, as suggested by Solomon (2001: 124). Hercules is looking for a trainer of heroes who lives disillusioned because he has failed with his previous pupils. Hercules finds him on a sort of elevated island enveloped in the mist, full of ruins, where the grass is tall and unkempt. *The Empire Strikes Back* (I. Keschner, 1977) begins with Ben Kenobi encouraging Luke Skywalker (who sees Kenobi as a "spiritual father") to seek out

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the Gorgon. Just like Phil told me. I analyzed the situation, controlled my strength and kicked. The crowds were wild!"). The Muses' enthusiasm is not far behind; in the song "Zero to Hero," they even compare him (however anachronistic and subliminal that comparison might be) with Julius Caesar: "he comes, he sees, he conquers," in allusion to the famous *veni, vidi, vici.*

38. García Alonso (2002: 565) has seen an echo of the Delphic maxim *Know Thyself* in the last piece of advice that Zeus offers his son ("Look inside your heart"). An echo from a similar piece of advice in Disney's *Pocahontas* ("listen with your heart / you will understand") is also possible. I owe this suggestion to Prof. M. Martín-Rodríguez.

master Yoda to receive instruction from him. Accompanied by R2D2,[39] Luke finds Yoda in a swampy, foggy place with a somewhat crazed appearance.[40] Initially, Yoda refuses to train him, but ends up agreeing to do so, and he subjects Luke to several exercises of mental control. Interestingly, his advice to Luke is similar to that received by Hercules at the Crossroad: "If you choose the quick and easy path as Vader did, you will become an agent of evil." Kenobi's comment to Yoda is significant as well: "That boy is our last hope," not unlike the following from Phil to Hercules: "You're my only last hope." There are few visual echoes in the training itself,[41] though there are some clear ones from *The Karate Kid* (J. G. Avidsen, 1984). Another influence (be it conscious or unconscious) comes from *The Empire Strikes Back*, when Luke destroys one of the armored vehicles that are decimating the resistance, which is reminiscent of Hercules' strategy while fighting the Cyclops, namely to make him fall by tangling his legs with some cable.

Yoda's influence must have been subliminal, however. The nature of their character was not clear yet on November, 1993,[42] but both Musker and Clements coincide in their notes on the convenience of modeling it after actor Danny DeVito (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55), even if Clements would later admit that Musker thought about it first.[43] The resemblance between actor and character is evident, as the side by side images offered by Rebello & Healey (1997: 126) illustrate, and DeVito indeed plays the voice of Phil on screen. According to Eric Goldberg, his leading animator, "Phil isn't a million miles removed from Grumpy, either" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 126).

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39. Luke arrives to the Dagobah System onboard a spaceship, accompanied by R2D2 who is part helper and part pet; Hercules, in turn, arrives to Phil's house riding his pet helper, the winged horse Pegasus. In both cases, the small size of the dwelling of the future master is emphasized; *The Lord of the Rings* will pick this up in an inverted fashion (a big sized master visits his future pupil who inhabits a tiny house).

40. Hercules, in turn, finds Phil harassing nymphs, one of which runs away and becomes a tree, in what appears to be an obvious parodic allusion to Daphne.

41. The image of Herc carrying a little doll (a "damsel in distress" simulacrum) as he moves around hanging from lianas is reminiscent of that of Luke carrying Yoda on his back during training.

42. "Does Herc have an 'animation' sidekick? A fantastic being like a centaur, griffin, nymph, satyr, etc? If so what is his relationship to Herc? Is he a mentor, a conscience, a pet? …" (J. Musker, in Rebello & Healey 1997: 55).

43. "It was John's idea to have Hercules have a satyr for a sidekick, an old cynical trainer-type, like in a fight movie" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 163).

4.4 Other film sources: The re-elaboration of motifs from the Disney vault

Reusing older material in new films is a common practice in the Disney studios. Sometimes, material already filmed but left out of a previous movie finds a new home in a newer product. Such was the case with a segment discarded from *Fantasia* (1940), later incorporated into *Make Mine Music* (1946) with a new musical score.[44] Other times, filmed materials that were first presented independently from one another are then combined to create a new product, as in the case of *Davy Crocket and the River Pirates* (1956), which joined two existing TV episodes of the adventures of the frontier hero for presentation in movie theaters. A third type of borrowing is the equivalent of a quote, as in *101 Dalmatians*, when the kidnapped puppies sit down to watch 1930s Disney shorts on television. Yet in other cases, rather than an actual reproduction of the earlier products we find images inspired by them, a phenomenon closer to hypertextuality than to intertextuality, as in the climactic scene in *The Great Mouse Detective*, set in a maze of ropes and gears in famous Big Ben, which brings to mind the 1937 Mickey Mouse short *Clock Cleaners*. This technique may be self parodic at times, as in the scene in *Enchanted* (K. Luna, 2007) in which a group of rats and cockroaches help the protagonist clean the untidy apartment in which she spends her first night in the city, a clear reference to *Snow White* (Finch 2011: 244; 435).

Hercules is no exception as far as plot and visual echoes of previous Disney movies are concerned. The celebration of the birth of Hercules, with Hades bringing an inappropriate gift, is reminiscent of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959):[45] there, during the celebration of the birth of Princess Aurora, the wicked Maleficent brings a peculiar *gift*: "The princess shall indeed grow in grace and beauty, beloved by all who know her. But, before the sun sets on her 16th birthday, she shall prick her fingers on the spindle of a spinning wheel, and die." In both cases, the undesirable visitor utters some ironic and derogatory words, while commenting on the sundry guests assembled.[46] The parallels may be summarized as follows:

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44. "Blue Bayou," a new song, performed by the Ken Darby Singers, replaced Debussy's "Clair de Lune".

45. Santana (2012: 279) points out a mythical subtext, Eris' rage when she is not invited to the wedding of Thetis and Peleus. Martín Rodríguez (1995) explores the parallels between both stories.

46. *Sleeping Beauty*: "Well, quite a glittering assemblage, King Stefan. Royalty, nobility, the gentry and – how quaint – even the rabble"; *Hercules*: "How sentimental. You know, haven't been this choked up since I got a hunk of moussaka caught in my throat! So is this an audience or a mosaic?"

- Arrival of a powerful and malevolent character at the celebration of the birth of a king's child, bringing a noxious gift, and addressing those assembled ironically;
- Existence of a prophesy to be fulfilled when the child becomes an adult. In the case of *Hercules*, fulfillment of the prophesy is contingent upon the absence of the child on the fateful day; in the second case, the presence of the girl is required to that effect;
- The child must leave the palace to live under the care of adoptive parents below the station accorded to her/him by birth,[47] and ignorant of her/his true origin;
- A narrative ellipsis ensues, skipping the childhood of the protagonist to bring her/him directly to the time when the prophesy will be fulfilled;
- The prophesy comes true at first, but is eventually undone;
- The moral of the story becomes apparent: true love conquers all, as stated explicitly, in the case of *Sleeping Beauty*, in the challenge addressed by Maleficent to Prince Philip: "… and prove that true love conquers all."

In addition, the scene when Zeus proudly presents his son to the other gods may have been influenced by a similar scene in *The Lion King* (1994), when Mufasa presents his newborn cub (Simba) to the other animals. Another detail may confirm the influence of this film: the hyenas' report to Scar, pretending to have killed Simba, finds a proper equivalent when Pain and Panic assure Hades they have killed Hercules. As Rebello & Healey (1997: 59) have noted, Irene Mecchi participated in the writing of both scripts, which strengthens the possibility of borrowings from one to the other.

Finally, *Pinocchio* (1940) offers a major Disney precedent for the main theme in *Hercules*, since the little puppet only becomes a real boy, that is, a true human being when he proves that he is willing to offer his own life to save his father's. John Musker made the connection explicit in 1993 in his notebook: "Herc is like Pinocchio learning life lessons, making mistakes and having to atone for them. Pinocchio wants to be a real boy, has to prove himself. Herc wants to be a god, has to prove himself" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55). In that sense, the couple Hercules-Phil may have been inspired by Pinocchio-Jiminy Cricket, and there is a clear visual echo from *Pinocchio* in *Hercules*: when Hades learns that Herc has defeated the hydra, he consumes his cigar in just one drag, as Pinocchio had done in Pleasure Island playing hooky with Lampwick.

47. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the narrator's voice explains: "Living like mortals, they [the three good fairies] had reared the child as their own."

4.5 Motifs taken from the Judeo-Christian imaginary

The idea of a hero with supernatural strength who loses it because of a loved woman – and then regains it causing the collapse of a building – appears to be a distant echo of the Samson story in the Bible. The motif of the collapsing columns was already featured in P. Francisci's *Hercules* (1958), and he took his inspiration from *Samson and Delilah* (C. B. DeMille, 1949).

5. Hercules as a parody of the structure of a Greek tragedy

As stated above, my goal is to analyze not only the presence of mythical material in *Hercules* but also generic conventions typical of classical literature. In that sense, the film may be used as a useful tool to explain the structure of a Greek tragedy, as experts were quick to point out. Cano (1999: 133), for instance, highlights how well the structure of the tragedy was respected, including a prologue and the choir's entrance; a first act with musical transition into the second; a second act divided in three episodes; the return of the choir; climax, and denouement: more faithful to Aristotle than his model, *Oedipus*. In fact, the movie begins with a short voice-over introduction: "Long ago, in the far land of ancient Greece there was a Golden Age of powerful gods and extraordinary heroes. And the greatest and strongest of all these heroes was the mighty Hercules. But what is the measure of a true hero? That is what our story is …" At that moment, he is interrupted by three of the Muses[48] ("Will you listen to him? He's makin' the story sound like some Greek tragedy;" "Lighten up, dude;" "We'll take it from here, darling") who go on with the narration, with the stated consent of the narrator ("You go, girl").[49] After that, the choir of the muses, dressed as a Gospel choir,[50] sings lyrics inspired by Zeus' victory over the Titans in Hesiod's *Theogony* (Solomon 2001: 124):

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48. As Winkler (2009: 91) points out, films in which the Muses appear are few. Their earliest appearance may be in *Jupiter's Thunder* (G. Méliès, 1903). There, as twenty years later in *The Last Days of Pompei* (C. Galleone, 1926), their statues come alive, just as they do in *Hercules*. For a thorough analysis of the Muses' presence in film, cf. Winkler (2005; 2009: 70–121; esp. 91–108; for Disney's *Hercules*, 91–93).

49. The narrator's voice is that of Charlton Heston.

50. This original decision is explained by John Musker as follows:" We felt strongly that a Greek movie with a score full of beautiful bazouki [*sic*] music would conjure a tone that wasn't as much fun as how we were thinking. So, we thought, the Muses were the goddesses of the arts *and* they're natural story-tellers *and* we are making a musical *and* we wanted something hipper than a stagy Greek chorus. I thought, 'Gospel music is a kind of story-telling thing, singing the praises of bigger-than-life deeds, whether it's a Biblical hero or someone more mortal'" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 163–164).

> Back when the world was new, the planet Earth was down on its luck and everywhere gigantic brutes called Titans ran amok. It was a nasty place. There was a mess wherever you stepped, where chaos reigned and the earthquakes and volcanoes never slept … And then along came Zeus. He hurled his thunderbolt. He zapped, locked those suckers in a vault.

This opening constitutes both a narrative prologue and a *parodos*, that is, the entrance of the choir in ancient tragedy. The Muses, who introduce themselves as "goddesses of the arts and proclaimers of heroes," are five: Thalia, Clio, Calliope, Melpomene and Terpsichore (Rebello & Healey 1997: 14–15). Next comes Hercules' birth, followed by an *agon* between Zeus and Hades, and then by the rest of the movie, which follows an alternating structure combining episodes that advance the plot with songs by the choir explaining and summarizing the action, a clear equivalent to the *stasima* of ancient tragedies (Winkler 2009: 92).[51] Thus, when Hercules is kidnapped in Olympus, the Muses explain the ensuing events, including the encounter with the adoptive parents and the consequences of ingesting the potion. This intervention by the choir, moreover, serves to inform viewers that eighteen years have elapsed. When Hercules defeats the hydra, the choir intervenes again, commenting on the resultant popularity that the hero enjoys in Thebes. The choir makes a final appearance at the conclusion of the film, in order to "bring home to the viewers the lesson to be learned from the story" (Winkler 2009: 92),[52] in the traditional manner of the *exodos* of ancient tragedy. Furthermore, it could be argued that there is even a beautiful case of *kommos* (a dialogue between a character and the choir) when Meg tries to avoid acknowledging her love for Herc by stating: "I won't say."

6. *Hercules* as a source for other mass culture products

As previously suggested, mass culture products based on the classical tradition are not only the result of a hybrid series of influences, but also a potential inspiration for later products. Even if *Hercules* did not reach the success levels of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992), or *The Lion King* (1994), it would be wrong to consider it a major failure, or a box office disappointment. Still, its reception in academic circles was lukewarm. Cano (1999: 133), for instance, acknowledged

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51. The number of choral songs, four ("The Gospel Truth," "Zero to Hero," "I won't say," and "A Star is Born") may not be accidental. I believe they may be equivalent to the *parodos*, two *stasima* and *exodos* of the typical tragedy.

52. "Within your heart's the power / for makin' you a hero too. / So don't lose hope when you're forlorn …".

that *Hercules* was the mythological movie to reach the largest audience ever, but he did not think much of it personally: the plot, in his opinion, is no more than a veritable *contaminatio* of some of the deeds that tradition attributes to the hero, adapted to the tastes of the fast food generation (fast, crunchy, spicy). According to Martin, Disney, with *Hercules*, "kills a myth", and he pronounces on the film a "condemnation without appeal" (2002: 365). For Blanshard (2005: 166), *Hercules* succeeds not in its storyline, but thanks to the images employed, which cleverly play on "the huge reservoir of classical imagery that forms part of the Western culture" and are the film's real stars, and he argues that "[s]uch works challenge any notion that the classical world is only the preserve of intellectual elites or that the Hercules name has lost any of its appeal." According to Lindner (2008: 42), the film received rather mixed reactions owing to two reasons: first, it contained many jokes based on anachronistic references and, also, its humor was not really child-oriented. Winkler (2009: 92) offers a positive appreciation: despite some excesses, "the film is a witty rewriting of Greek myth as a satire of modern consumerism and celebrity cults." Several newspaper reviewers, less concerned with academic rigor, also provided positive assessments of the film. Such was the case with Janet Maslin in *The New York Times* (June 13, 1997): "After a run of relative disappointments, Disney animation is back in top form with this happily bastardized mythology lesson, one that could well have the post 'Beavis and Butt-head' generation collecting many-headed Hydras and contemplating Grecian urns." At the opposite end of the spectrum, Finch (2011: 301) considers the film an appalling failure: the production values are excellent, there are clever visual gags and some good songs, but the characters are poorly developed, especially the hero, whom he considers a fool; even when he flaunts his strength, Hercules looks idiotic rather than attractive. Blanshard (2005: 164), on the other hand, offers a more nuanced opinion on the protagonist: "Disney's Hercules is an awkward adolescent whose greatest desire is to find out 'where he belongs' […] His is a character-type that Disney had already perfected in *Aladdin* and the *Lion King.*" According to co-director John Musker, "Andreas [Deja] brought not only his exceptional drawing and animation skills, but an exuberant boyish innocence to the character of Hercules" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 106).

Nonetheless, the film made a respectable $245 million profit (Solomon 2001: 124). In that context, it is no wonder that, only some months after *Hercules*' release, the Italian studio AVO Film, which specializes in the production of sequels to any new film released or announced by the big companies, produced – as expected – a non-authorized sequel: *Hercules the Invincible Hero – A Legendary Tale*, although this sequel owes less to Disney's film than to the TV series *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, very popular in the 1980s (Lindner 2008: 43–44). Almost simultaneously with the Disney version, the label Golden Films – which also specializes in Disney remakes – released another *Hercules* that seems to combine traits of the AVO version (the protagonist's resemblance to He-Man, for example) and of Disney's *Hercules*: statues offering commentary in the opening scenes, biographical structure, the idea of proving oneself worthy by unselfish actions, or two avatars of Pain and Panic, playfully called here Homer and Virgil! (Lindner 2008: 44–45). Also in 1997 the British company Pulse Distribution and Entertainment released *The Invincible Hero Hercules*, in which it is Hera (not Hades) who plans to overthrow Zeus.[53]

Interestingly, if *Hercules* borrowed freely from *Clash of the Titans* (D. Davis, 1981), as we saw, its unfortunate remake of the same title (L. Leterrier, 2010) borrows from the Disney film as freely, while also taking some ideas from the general myth of Hercules, transferring them to Perseus. Among the former we could cite the role of Hades as villain; the latter include the transformation of Zeus in Acrisius in order to sleep with his wife and thus engender Perseus.[54]

The connections between *Hercules* and the magical adventures of Harry Potter are also worth exploring. Elsewhere (Martín Rodríguez 2009) I have analyzed the filmic intertexts in the Harry Potter saga, and here I intend to highlight some peculiar parallels with the Disney film.

When Hercules is born, Hades – the god who reigns *among the dead* – plots a conspiracy to take over Olympus	When Harry Potter is born, a sinister magician, Volde*mort* – whose followers are called *Death Eaters* – aims to control the magical world[a]
Thanks to three crazed soothsayers, the Fates – who share a magical eye that allows them to know what the future holds – Hades learns that his plan will fail if the newborn Hercules interferes	Thanks to a crazy soothsayer, Professor Trelawney – who owns a magical crystal ball reminiscent of an eye – Volde*mort* learns that the greatest enemy for the success of his plan is a newborn baby, Harry Potter
Hades charges his minions with killing Hercules, but they fail, though they succeed in taking him away from his parents; Hercules is then taken in by a couple of mortals who become his adoptive parents	Voldemort kills Harry's parents, but he cannot do the same with the child, who is taken in by his aunt and uncle, the Dursleys, who become his adoptive parents
For several years, Hercules ignores his divine condition, and he is shunned by the other children because of his uncontrolled strength	For several years, Harry ignores he is a magician, and he is shunned by the other children because of the strange things that happen when he gets angry[b]

53. Lindner (2008: 46–47). Also, in the film *Hercules and Xena* (L. Naylor, 1998), it is Hera who releases the Titans to conquer Olympus. Xena had appeared sporadically in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, but she would end up as the protagonist of her own series, *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001).

54. Cf. Lillo (2010: 83), who also identifies echoes from *Troy* or *The Lord of the Rings*.

Upon becoming a young man, Hercules finally learns about his origins, and he begins his training to become a true hero; his teacher is Phil, a bizarre satyr	When Harry turns eleven, he finally learns about his origins,[c] and he begins his training to become a true magician; his teachers are several bizarre creatures like the giant Hagrid, the lycanthrope Lupin, and the demented Mad Eye Moody
During his training period, Hercules defeats several monsters sent by Hades to eliminate him	During his training period, Harry must fight several monsters sent by Voldemort, and even Voldemort himself
For the final confrontation, Hades releases the Titans and makes them his allies to assault Olympus	For the final confrontation, Voldemort recruits as his allies multiple monsters (trolls, giants, werewolves)
In the end, Hercules understands that the only way to become a true hero involves being willing to sacrifice his own life for his loved ones; he plunges into the river of death to save Meg, and he returns from the kingdom of the dead invulnerable to Hades	In the end, Harry understands that the only way to defeat Voldemort involves being willing to sacrifice his own life for his loved ones; he enters the Dark Forest, allowing Voldemort to kill him, and then he returns from the dead invulnerable to Voldemort

a On the other hand, Voldemort's physical appearance in the film version is amazingly similar to that of Hades in *Hercules*.

b A note in Ron Clements's notebook about Hercules, could, in fact, be applied to Harry Potter when he was a child: "Other kids are afraid of him. People are intimidated by him. He can break things and be destructive without meaning to" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 55).

c Interestingly, a comment made by Zeus upon first meeting his son ("Why, you've got your mother's beautiful eyes …") is similar to comments made by friends of Harry Potter's parents when they meet the young magician. In *Hercules*' case, the reference is probably to Hera's epithet in epic poetry, *boopis* ("cow-eyed").

Still, it is possible that Harry Potter's voluntary death to save the magical world may be more directly inspired by the death of the lion Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the seven-volume *magnum opus* penned by the Anglo-Irish professor and author C.S. Lewis between 1949 and 1954, now a classic of children's literature, and more precisely by *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe,* the first book in the series, published in 1950. In fact, J. K. Rowling acknowledges the influence of *The Chronicles of Narnia* in her work, apparent in such details as the number of volumes in the series, the existence of a parallel magical world (and even its entrance points), and some names, among others.

Another filmic landmark of our own times, *Star Wars*, also features the motif of the willing sacrifice (in this case to save humanity). At the end of the sixth episode, Luke Skywalker realizes that only by allowing the evil Emperor to kill him will he succeed in having his father return to the good side of the Force, thus saving the Galaxy. Underneath it all, it is easy to see a Christ-inspired subtext, and the superimposed images of Anakin, Yoda, and Kenobi at the end of the film constitute a very thinly-veiled allusion to the Holy Trinity.

In any case, it may be worth remembering that the life of the hero, in archetypal terms, may also be read as a magnified metaphor of the life of any (male) human being in a patriarchal society. In that sense, the wonderful birth is nothing but an equivalent of the marvelous process by which the union of a spermatozoon and an egg produces the complexity of a human being; the great danger right after the birth is a symbol of the dangers associated with childbirth and the puerperium in primitive societies, but also an echo of the rigorous rites of passage that – in some cultures – the newly born was required to undergo in order to be admitted into the community; the period during which the heroic condition is latent – or *incubated* – is an image of childhood; the hero's deeds, which often entail fighting against death, are a metaphor for the rites of passage to adulthood in primitive societies, in which a symbolic death was often required since the birth of the adult requires the death of the inner child;[55] and, since victory over death marks the passage into adult life, it comes as no surprise that the hero should then win the heart of a princess, considering that marriage and the start of a family constitutes the normal future for an adult in patriarchal societies. Even the hero's attenuated death may be read metaphorically, since we too leave behind a posterity: our children (Martín Rodríguez 2009: 173–174).

Lastly, there seems to be a clear influence of *Hercules* in the second installment of another best seller for young adults: Laura Gallego's *Memorias de Idhún II: Triada* (2005). According to a prophesy, Victoria (the unicorn girl), Jack (the last dragon), and Christian (the Shek) must fight Ashram, the seventh of the gods, who is at war with the other six (like Hades is with the Olympian gods). Ashram captures them, but he makes Victoria an offer: she can save whichever of her two lovers she chooses in return for her magical unicorn horn (not unlike Hades' offering Hercules to save Meg in exchange for his strength). Victoria saves both, however, and they are banished to another dimension, from which they return to fight Ashram once more, though he defeats them again. Victoria then kills Ashram with the magical staff, after reminding him that he had not fulfilled his part of the deal, since Jack and Christian were not supposed to receive any harm.

7. Conclusion

Disney's *Hercules* exemplifies the ways in which classical culture expands, recreates itself, and acquires new meanings in popular culture. In the first place, the film is the product of a careful research process that results not in a mere derivative copy of the canonical versions but in freedom for its creators to adapt the story to their

55. In the same manner by which the girl must die so that she can become a woman, as seen in fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White*.

own tastes and interests, as well as to the specific conditions of its context. Alongside the free use of classical mythological sources, in *Hercules* we can see examples of hybridization with second-degree mythological sources,[56] such as successful popular movies, and with elements borrowed from prototypical heroes of audiovisual culture such as Superman. To this, the film adds some subtle Biblical subtexts, as well as recycled material from the Disney vault. In consequence, *Hercules* belongs to the first of the two ways in which, according to Spina (2008: 58), classical culture can be re-incorporated into contemporary culture, that is, the "contamination" and the intertwining of different dimensions of time and space, or the production of images from the ancient world that correspond as closely as possible to the sources.

As Lindner (2008) rightly points out, in this type of film "[t]he explicit orientation towards a young audience seems to be responsible for most of the alterations made to the classical narrative," and this orientation implies, in general, the absence of sexual contents and the reduction of violence, according – on the one hand – to the producers' idea of what stories are suitable for children, and – on the other – to concerns about the economic consequences of a bad qualification in the movie rating systems. This leads usually to "[t]he simplification of plot structures, the reduced number of characters and places, the commonness of child figures, the mono-causal explanations or the clear moral messages …" (Lindner 2008: 54). In the case of Disney's film, as Blanshard (2005: 164) suggests: "In keeping with conservative family values, the film makes Hercules not the product of an adulterous fling, but a child abduction victim who was whisked about from his loving parents Hera and Zeus while they slept on Mt Olympus." He never meets Deianeira, or suffers from the effects of the poisoned robe: he just concentrates on his memorable deeds, a love story, and an ill-fated coup d'état, as Lindner (2008: 43) states. Co-director John Musker explains plainly why the canonical version of classical mythology had to be thoroughly reworked: "We took the mythology very loosely, though, because Hercules supposedly had these fits of madness and incredible temper where he'd do things like kill his best friend or his wife and kids …" (Rebello & Healey 1997: 53).

Children, however, seldom go to the movies by themselves, but accompanied by their parents, an adult audience that always enjoys clever anachronisms, fun visual echoes, as well as intertextual allusions to other films that are part of the collective imaginary as a sort of shared heritage. In the case of anachronisms, we can cite the phenomenon of merchandising, the fans, the Fates' prophetic tip to Pain and Panic ("Indoor plumbing – It's gonna be big"), or the alleged flasher from Thebes that ends up being a watch seller, just to mention a few examples. A fun visual echo is found when Hercules, in the scene of the pond with Meg, throws a rock into the

56. C*ontaminatio* seems to be a common feature of the filmic versions of the myth, not always a consequence of conscious choices made by script writers; cf. Clauss (2008).

water not knowing what to do with his hands: we hear a *crack* sound and we see that a Venus statue has lost its arms; this constitutes a beautiful, etiologic and parodic micro-tale about the possible origin of the Venus de Milo. As for intertextual allusion to other films, we can think of the constellation in the shape of Marilyn Monroe over the subway grate (as featured in B. Wilder's *The Seven Year* Itch, 1955) which appears in the sky during the performance of "From Zero to Hero."

On the other hand, we have also detected frequent winks directed to a more learned audience, based on subtle references to classical literature or culture. Passing in front of Cerberus, for example, Hades throws him a steak, for which his three heads start fighting. It seems at first sight a visual joke directed to the youngest in the audience, but it brings to mind the advice received by Psyche in Apuleius' novel to enter and exit hell (cf. Apul. *Met.* VI 18–19), although Verg. *Aen.* VI 417–421 is perhaps a more probable source. Another wink to those familiar with classical culture could be detected in the medallion with Zeus's name which we see in the feast on the Olympus around Hercules' neck and later when Hercules discovers his true filiation. On the one hand, it seems an allusion to the topic of the *crepundia* or tokens that permit (in classical comedies) the identification of lost or kidnapped children; on the other hand, it is possible to see a reference to the Roman ceremony of the *lustratio*, in which the children of Roman citizens received the *bulla aurea*, especially considering the golden nature of the medallion, and the fact that his father fastens it around his neck in the moment in which the rest of the gods are summoned for the public presentation of the child.

In any case, as Solomon (2001: 124) noted: "Its success is no surprise, for in many ways the film is much more clever than its young audience (and many parents) could appreciate," and Lindner (2008: 43), who qualifies its humor as not really child-oriented, emphasizes that "[i]ts self-irony, its intertextual references, anachronistic punch lines and very stylized look reveal *Hercules* to be a rather grown-up comedy struggling to work as a children's film as well." Furthermore, since a film like *Hercules* was likely to be closely scrutinized by a specialized academic audience (critics, experts in literature and mythology), the scriptwriters opted for offering them a funny parody of the structure of a tragedy.

"Whether we want it or not, films like *Hercules*" exert a definite influence on the popular image of heroes and myth, and it is likely that many people who are not familiar with the academic version of the myth of Hercules would now believe that Pegasus was his horse.[57] In addition, films like this one also influence subsequent

57. As stated by Martin, in his vitriolic analysis of the film: "beaucoup de collégiens sont, paraît-il, tellement persuadés que le film leur a révélé la vérité sur Hercule, qu'ils contestent vigoureusement la version différente que tentent de leur donner du mythe les malheureux enseignants de Lettres classiques!" (Martin 2002: 373).

mass culture products. The plot structure of *Hercules*, for instance, seems to have had a (conscious or unconscious) influence on J. K. Rowling as she wrote about the adventures of Harry Potter. Potter may be following – perhaps unbeknownst to him – the same road followed by Hercules, though not the canonical hero of mythology books but the anachronistic and full of life protagonist of the children's film.

I would like to conclude, then, with the following quote from Spina (2008: 64) and his brilliant analysis of mythology-inspired animated movies:

> Classical tradition thus continues to find new ways of sustaining itself and nourishing modern culture. Classical philologists need to follow up those avenues in order to trace and recognize the various transformation stages and render them visible to a growing audience that no longer derives its acquaintance with antiquity from erudite philological studies.[58]

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Κλέα ἀνδρῶν

Classical heroes in the heavy metal

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Heavy metal is the genre of popular music which probably has the greater presence of motifs of the classical tradition. But why are classical heroes 'heavies'? By analysing some of the characteristics of the genre, this study indicates that the theme of the hero would seem to find a close connection with heavy metal's ideological and aesthetic preferences. Besides that, this paper offers the example of works having different kinds of classical heroes: epic heroes, tragic heroes and adventurers. By doing so, it aims to suggest a meaningful dialogue between antiquity and modernity where the latter either reinforces or contests established values from the former.

Keywords: popular music, heavy metal, classical tradition, classical hero, Greek and Latin epic and tragedy

Introduction

In classical literature there often exist heroes who are also singers – Achilles in *Iliad* IX, 186–189; Ulysses in various passages of the *Odyssey*[1] – and, above all, heroes whose fame – *kleos andron* – depends only on the immortal words of the *aoidos*. The men who star in these stories, and who become heroes through mediation and grace of the songs in the epic and classic tragedy, reappear, with special vigour, from the 80s of the 20th century in a controversial genre, as much reviled by critics as glorified by those who followed: heavy metal.[2] These days, the study of this phenomenon

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1. The 'false' tales in 13.256–277, 14.192–339 and 19.171–203; 17. 422–443; the 'true' tales to the Feacians (books 9–12) and Penelope (23.305–344).

2. In this paper the terms *heavy metal, heavy* or *metal* are used interchangeably to refer to genre. The term *heavy* is also used as noun adjective to refer to musicians and fans. For other uses cf. Weinstein 1991: 7–8.

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is probably living its best moment. This has to do with the increasingly widespread academic interest in the current popular culture, which, in turn, far from having relegated Greco-Roman heritage as something alien and distant, has assimilated it just as it did with other materials.

The number of artists who have paid attention to themes and motifs of antiquity – and especially frequently to its heroes – is great, and their compositions are relevant in a context of revitalization of the studies of the tradition and reception of classics[3] in popular culture. With regard to the music, different studies have recently addressed their attention to the classical tradition in different musical genres, such as rock (Villalba Álvarez 2008), pop (Martín Rodríguez 2010), hip hop (Pihel 1996, Banks 2010, Gainsford 2010), electronic (Schott-Billmann 2000, Vaudrin 2004) or singer-songwriter's music (Tenório Rocha 1993, Oosterhuis 2012, Thomas 2012, González Manjarés 2013, Marques Pereira 2013).

If the study of the classics in contemporary popular music can be approached by taking a specific genre as corpus, it is because the genres are well-defined models with common characteristics which relate not only to the musical aspects, to the names of the bands, to the contents of the songs or to the album covers and the official merchandise, but also to a whole subculture that has developed around them. In fact, a particular musical style will often accompany a recognizable personal aesthetic and even a form of leisure shared by its followers.

Weinstein (1991: 22) spoke in this way of three dimensions in heavy music: the sonic, the visual and the verbal dimension. The sonic dimension includes, inter alia, the power of volume. This music is not only to be listened to, but to be felt reverberating in one's chest as if it were war drums, thus establishing a first imaginary resemblance to the classical epic. Meanwhile, between the sonic and the visual dimension would be the artists. The instrument virtuosos – 'guitar heroes' – run – 'solos' – performances like the *aristeias* of the heroes of the epic, or instrumental clashes, as well as the *agones* in the tragedy. These *agones* in the world of the heavy are particularly relevant in the guitar sphere. In the 80s Judas Priest were pioneers in this type of "guitar duels" in which the two guitarists of the band alternate performing instrumental virtuosity.

Meanwhile, the psychedelic component of the genre (Weinstein 1991: 15–17) would lead to soundscapes where the protagonists of fantastic stories move: the adventurous heroes. As for the verbal dimension, Weinstein (1991: 35) highlighted two major themes in heavy, both purely of Greek inspiration: the Dionysian

3. Some notes on the tradition / reception and complementary bibliography about terminology can be found in Brockliss, Chaudhuri, Haimson Lushkov & Wasdin 2012: 7, specially n. 17.

themes – in its classical formulation ‘sex, drugs and rock n’ roll’[4] and the themes of chaos – violence, madness, pain, darkness, among others –. Both musically and in contents, heavy metal tends towards escapism, empowerment and transgression. Emotions such as anger, aggression, but also sadness, fear, depression, grandeur, drama and a powerful energy, that is to say, the “aesthetic exploration of serious emotions” (Wallach, Berger & Greene 2011: 14–15) are part of its nature.

Obviously, in a volume written by classicists, the point of departure and the point of arrival are the texts. Not even by understanding the text in a broad sense and, even, in a postmodern one, involving more than words, would we be able to completely avoid the trap of “reducing the meaning of a song to the literal meaning of its lyrics” (Walser 1993: 21), which, moreover, are not always easily intelligible in the case of a heavy metal song. As Weinstein points out (1991: 34): “Most lyrics are best understood as a loose array of fragmentary suggestive signifiers.” But since a complete musicological analysis is beyond the scope of this work and the knowledge of its author, the task of analysing the content assumes first that the reading of an academic is different from the point of view of a fan or musician, and, on the other hand, that all meaning supposes a negotiation and a dialogue. In other words, the act of the reception implies a subject (the author of these pages) reading another subject (the heavy artist) who is reading a third subject (the classic) and almost always through a mediator (cf. Martindale 2013: 172).

Under these assumptions, and also approaching the existing sociological studies on the issue, this paper proposes, first, to analyse the causes of the strong presence of classical heroes in heavy metal and, secondly, to offer the example of works having different types of classical heroes. The latter will be divided for the purpose of clarity into: epic heroes, tragic heroes and adventurers. The selection of this genre and works is due to several reasons: (1) Heavy metal is the genre of popular music which probably has the greater presence of motifs of classical tradition. (2) It is a genuinely contemporary genre, but with bands with broad and consolidated paths that create complex products for a wide audience – from its ‘crystallization’ in the 70s of XX century (Weinstein 1991: 21) heavy metal has had a huge spreading in the Americas, Europe and much of Asia (Wallach, Berger & Greene 2011: 5) –. (3) It is the genre in which the theme of the hero offers a further development and finds a closer connection with its own ideological and aesthetic preferences.

4. It should be clarified that the second element, the drug, is absent in many subgenres.

State of the matter

An undervalued genre by the academic world in the past and object of controversy and fears related to its possible effects on adolescents (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris & LeVine 2011: 6–8, Arnett 1991: 76–77), the first academic studies concerning heavy metal date from the 90s. The three pioneering works by Dona Gaines (1991), Deena Weinstein (1991) and Robert Walser (1993) have become a sort of Capitoline Triad of the scholarship of heavy metal. Alongside these works, which provide detailed histories of the genre in an academic format, it is worth highlighting the documentary *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey*, directed by the Canadian anthropologist Sam Dunn, in 2005. The film is a sociological, musicological and historical study, facing political problems related to the genre, and offers a rigorous analysis of the subgenres.

Besides, the recent work by Umurhan (2012) is essential for being one of the most complete on the appropriation of Greece and Rome in heavy metal. It belongs to a new trend in the studies of the genre that has shown its effectiveness in forums such as the Second *Global Conference of Heavy Fundametalisms: Music, Metal and Politics* (Salzburgo, November 2009), *The Heavy Metal and Popular Culture Conference* (Bowling State University, Ohio, April 2013) or the CAMWS (The Classical Association of the Middle West and South) meeting that in 2014 devoted a full panel to the *Heavy Metal Classics* and whose organizers are preparing a set volume under the same title.[5] On the other hand, in Italy the Mythimedia research group, led by Professor Cavallini, has both a website about the Greek myth in today's culture,[6] and several specific papers on classical themes in heavy metal songs (Cavallini 2009 and 2010) and a monography on the double concept album about the *Oresteia* of the Americans Virgin Steele (Liverani 2009). As shown by the proliferation of related publications, we consider that this is a proper moment to tackle this topic.

It is not only that the maturity of the studies on heavy metal and the reception of the classics in popular culture appear to have converged at the same time, but also that other media phenomena have joined this process. Already in 2009 Campbell noticed, in the frame of a study on the figures of Achilles and Alexander in heavy metal, the impact of films like *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) or *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2004) on this music. Since the beginning of the 21st century the interest of filmmakers for antiquity, and very

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5. Cf. <http://www.bgsu.edu/arts-and-sciences/cultural-and-critical-studies/popular-culture/conferences-and-institutes/agenda.html> and <https://camws.org/meeting/2014/panels.php> [26/09/2014].

6. <http://www.mythimedia.org/> [26/09/2014].

specifically for its heroes, has not stopped growing. The epic deeds of the Spartans in *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) – movie based on the comic by Frank Miller – assumed an iconographic landmark, followed by the less fortunate *300: Rise of an Empire* (Noam Murro, 2014) and *Hercules* (Renny Harlin, 2014).

The transfers among different formats such as the comics, the movies and heavy metal music, fall into the context of trans-mediality – that is, in short, the presence of the same motif in different formats – and they are continuous.[7] For example, the soundtrack of the trailer for the latest release of *300* is a remix of the song "War Pig" of the legendary heavy metal band Black Sabbath; on the other hand, the Norwegian Circus Maximus take their name from the film *Gladiator* (Campbell 2009: 111, n 2), while the character of Achilles in the song Jag Panzer – which we will discuss later in this paper – derives directly from *Troy*. Not all the heavy metal heroes come from the world of cinema, far from it. The genre already had enough elements in common with them and the rise of cinema has only strengthened those elements. It was only a matter of time before the academic world paid attention to the phenomenon, already mature and consolidated, of the presence of the classical heroes in heavy metal.

After having outlined the situation of the studies on this genre, it is time to ask why the classical heroes move so naturally in this medium.

Why are classical heroes heavies?

In order to answer this question we must analyse some of the characteristics of the genre. It is a marginal but prestigious subculture, tiller of a certain elitism, although not exclusive, and conservative in its traditions, a subculture that in regard to the antiquity has shown a special interest in the epic themes, in power and masculinity, escapism and identity.

Global subculture

Heavy metal is a marginalized subculture, but sophisticated (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris & LeVine 2011: 11) and extended among many countries, having spread its sphere of geographical influence to the five continents and becoming a global phenomenon as popular in Brazil, as in Israel, Scandinavia, Japan, Iraq or Malaysia. Such phenomenon is evidenced by the reviewers and editors of the monograph *Metal*

7. They are not new, but already present in movies like *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982) (cf. Weinstein 1991: 40).

rules the Globe (Wallach, Berger & Greene 2011). The geographical expansion of *metal* has also been the subject of the documentary *Global Metal* (2008) by Sam Dunn, who investigated the presence of the genre, among other places, in Islamic countries where this music is both, legally and strictly, prohibited. Globalization brings heavy metal closer to another group: the fans of antiquity, who form minority groups, although spread worldwide, highly interrelated and very active.

According to Hjelm, Kahn-Harris & LeVine (2011: 14), early metal fans balance out the lack of popularity of this music by establishing ties with the music scenes of other countries. This probably contributed to the homogeneity and dissemination of the metal culture, enhancing a sense of belonging to a global community of its members.

Heavy metal has thus become a *lingua franca* among its worldwide fans powered by increasing accessibility to new technologies. It exerts its influence on the globalized environment and in a similar way to classical culture: as a form of *paideia* and in a common place in which not only Europeans but the whole Western civilization and all its countries recognize themselves. Classical culture and heavy metal have come to the Caribbean and Asia by the same paths of exchange typical of capitalist postcolonial societies and have become ingrained in them.

Inclusive elitism

Like classicism, the heavy metal world has a taste for erudition. Proof of this is the *Encyclopaedia Metallum*,[8] whose Latin name is already a nod to antiquity. Also known as The Metal Archives it is an extensive online database providing information about the bands. There is also much exegesis in specialized metal forums on the internet, where fans interpret and comment on their favourite artists.

The seriousness of the discussions has even led to the distinction within the multiple subgenres[9] of metal at various levels of authenticity and quality. Just as the academy has traditionally separated the low culture from the high culture, the heavies have also come to work in a similar way by establishing distinctions reminiscent of the high / low culture in a context that, from the outside, is considered to belong to the second type of culture (Allett 2011: 165).

Since the question of authenticity is vitally important, subgenres are continuously created in heavy metal, trying to usurp this prerogative to the detriment of

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8. <http://www.metal-archives.com> [26/09/2014]. Also cf. Jasper & Oliver (1983).

9. For a basic distinction between the subgenres of metal cf. Weinstein 1991: 43–52 and the chapter on this in the documentary by Sam Dunn (2005).

other varieties.[10] What these discussions reflect is that belonging to a subculture is attractive for the fans, as it distinguishes them from mainstream and contributes in shaping their identity. There is a series of elements that can have the effect of surprise and can provoke attraction and rejection at the same time: to be a 'well up on' in the subject or an amateur, in short, to be an 'initiated' or profane, to have a good record collection as if it were a good library, to form a select group and to be able to appreciate the depth and complexity of a material that to untrained eyes and ears causes rejection and seems anything but worship, sensitive and prepared. All of this with a positive balance as it's shown by the growing number of heavy followers.[11] In that sense, heavy metal is an inclusive culture.

Considering the above mentioned, the appeal of the classics may be motivated by the search for legitimacy and prestige by the global elite of heavy metal listeners. Although in the case of heavy metal, as in many other manifestations of popular culture, the classics have the same status as any other referent (Campbell 2009: 116, 122), it is true that

> Classical allusion, however superficial, is intended to appropriate the traditional *gravitas* associated with the classical world either through its language or its history, thereby affirming the authority or mystique of the band relative to their audience. (Campbell 2009: 113; cf. 121)

On the other hand, heavy does not usually trivialize the classic elements, at least not intentionally, which does occur in other genres and other forms of popular culture. On the contrary, the 'metalheads' seem to have a respect for tradition, while this, as T.S. Eliot would say, is "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (1923: 271).

Classical tradition

Heavy is a conservative genre also because it keeps its own tradition, establishing a canon that honours its pioneers elevating them to the status of heroes and perpetuating their models (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris & LeVine 2013: 10).

The 'mythical' bands – as their own fans call them – make a kind of modern pantheon of semi-divine, powerful and enigmatic beings whose terrible appearance cause something like the *deos* in the Greek Theatre.

10. See Allet (2011), Campbell (2009: 119–120) and Lucas, Deeks & Spracklen (2011: 286).

11. The final scene of the aforementioned documentary by Sam Dunn (2005) illustrates this paradox very well.

As noted by Fletcher (2014: 1–2), classical history and myth – for such are the favourite elements of these artists – seem to have been present in heavy music from the very beginning until today on songs of bands as well known as Led Zeppelin – "Achilles Last Stand" (*Presence*, Swan Song, 1976)–, Iron Maiden – "The Flight of Icarus" (*Piece of Mind*, EMI/Capitol/Santuary/Columbia Records, 1983) and "Alexander the Great" (*Somewhere in Time*, EMI/Capitol Records, 1986) –, Manowar – "Achilles: Agony and Ecstasy in Eight Parts" (*The Triumph of Steel*, Atlantic Records, 1992) –, Blind Guardian – "And Then There Was Silence" (*A Night at the Opera*, Virgin/Century Media, 2002) – or Symphony X – "The Odyssey" (*The Odyssey*, InsideOut Music, 2002).

The *Encyclopaedia Metallum* leaves no doubt with regard to the presence of Antiquity in heavy metal. If we search for 'Lyrical Themes' by typing 'Greek' a list of 80 bands is obtained: 25 are Greek, 25 from the other European countries, 19 are north Americans, 7 Latin American, 4 Australian and 1 Israeli. The subtopics within the Encyclopaedia for these bands speak for themselves: ancient civilizations, Greek history, epic, Greek mythology, Greek legends, Classical period, fantasy, love, violence, death, destruction, decadence, battles, sacrilege, blasphemy, occultism, paganism, drugs, revolution, Greek pride, Greek tragedy, philosophy, Greek thinkers, Nietzsche, etc. If 'Roman' is typed, the result is a list of 27 bands, 16 of which are from Italy. Many of them also have Latin names.[12] The repertoire of subtopics again is enlightening: Roman Empire, Roman history, Roman tradition, legends of ancient Rome, Vikings, barbarians, Roman Mythology, Roman gods, Roman catholic church, hell, apocalypses, war, epic themes, cruelty, hatred, nature, etc.

The results are not exhaustive and at first glance there are some important absences in the search, such as the North American Virgin Steele, who would find themselves under the search 'Mythology'. However, through a search like this, the importance of Greco-Roman themes in the different subgenres of metal and their preference for the epic, the war and the mythological and religious are clear.

Sense of epic

Among the historical themes and classical myth present in heavy metal, those in which the epic sense is dominant prevail, as in the genre's desire to escape from the routine and vulgarity of the heroes – fictitious or real ones – they are the most attractive. The epic has to do with ideas of power and domination, central to heavy metal, but also with fantasy and folklore.

12. As an example, Morbid Angel has recently released an album heavily criticized under the title *Illud Divinum Insanus* [*sic*] (Seasons of Mist, 2011).

The greatness of the epic is transposed to music through the complexity of instrumentation, arrangements and the length of songs – "Achilles: Agony and Ecstasy in Eight Parts" by Manowar is 28′ long; "The *Odyssey*" by Symphony X, 24′–. The use of Latin and to a lesser extent of Greek in the lyrics of songs, album titles or names of the groups themselves, could also be attributed to the same desire to confer an epic character to the compositions. Campbell (2009: 112) provides some examples of the widespread use of Latin and Greek names of bands, albums and songs, not always with philological accuracy: Hades, Chimerian Path, Charon, Persefone; *Carpe Noctem* demo (Independent, 1996) by Agathodaimon or *De Principii evangelikum* [*sic*] (Osmose Productions, 2002) by Antaeus. Latin, on the other hand, is chosen by bands interested in Satanism and occultism for its connection to the sacred texts of Christianity.

Furthermore, the epic genre talks about the basics of civilizations and heavy is a predominantly western genre, even if over time it has expanded and has had a huge impact on the eastern market. No wonder then that among its immediate references there have always been the heroes of antiquity and with them certain values of national identity – nationalist – and masculinity are shared. The nationalist use of it seems to be more widespread among the European bands and, in all honesty, we must say that is often more based on the northern European mythologies – Amon Amarth's viking metal is an example of it – than on the Mediterranean one. However, we find the Roman side in Italy with bands like Heimdall and Stormlord – which have dedicated two separate albums to Virgil's *Aeneid* – and White Skull, with songs about Julius Caesar and Spartacus. From the side of the populations conquered by Rome, the Swedish band Eluveitie adopts the point of view of the Celts in the album Helvetios (Nuclear Blast, 2012)[13] and the German Rebellion, the point of view of the Teutonic in *Arminius-Furor teutonicus* (Massacre Records, 2012). Alongside, in Greece, the Sacred Blood band has conceptual albums about the Battle of Thermopylae and Alexander the Great and a project on the Argonautica.

A similar phenomenon is represented by the Kawir, a Greek band also, – a sort of 'conceptual band' who dedicates all its albums and songs to the Greek antiquity and has caught the attention of the far-right movements in Greece[14] – and Ethos Heroicon, whose album *Superior Hellas* (Independent, 2002) speaks for itself. The

13. About the Celtic identity in the heavy cf. Taylor (2014).

14. Cf. The interview offered in the blog γενος ελληνων, 'Greek Race': <http://polemosgenel.blogspot.com.es/2012/05/kawir.html> [26/09/2014]. See also the controversy over Golden Dawn's deputy Yorgos Yermenis: <http://www.lifo.gr/now/politics/9665?comments_page=1&comments_order=r > [26/09/2014].

music provides at all times the construction of the identity of the individual and the nation, and in the most extreme cases, of the outsider.[15]

In short, the epic dimension of heavy metal can be understood as escapist, foundational and dominant. In the latter sense it also explains its eminently masculine spirit.

The masculine dimension

Heavy has often been accused of being an exclusive club of men and it is true that most band members and most of the fans are men. There are, of course, notable exceptions, such as the British Girlschool, a band created in 1978 and inspiring an entire women's movement in heavy metal. Although over the years women have been gaining authority in all areas of heavy metal and that masculinity itself has been revised, many of the gender stereotypes that have traditionally characterized this music still prevail.

The best example of masculinity, the epic and the warrior, is offered by the American band Manowar. From the very name of the group, which includes the terms 'man' and 'war', to the composition dedicated to Achilles, the Greek epic hero par excellence, "their preoccupation with the idea of the warrior and the imagery of manliness are near legendary" (Campbell 2009: 117). The theme of masculinity in this band borders on the purest male chauvinism, nevertheless, the number of female fans they have is striking. The lyrics to their song "Hail and Kill" (*Kings of Metal*, Atlantic Records, 1988) are well known, which summarize this attitude in the verses: "Rape their women as they cry …" chanted by men and women together at the concerts of the band. There was also a time when, during his concerts, all girls who wanted to, were allowed to walk on the stage and the bassist, DeMaio used to kiss and touch them in a very shocking and even violent way.

According to some authors heavy metal traditionally "invited constructions of the masculine as markedly individualistic, often rebellious or transgressive, powerful, and characterized by intense emotion" (Wallach, Berger & Greene 2011: 25). But heavy metal is no longer an exclusive territory of men. On one hand, many bands have a woman at the forefront and, on the other, many fans are tired of the traditional image of female groupies. The case of the Swedish band Arch Enemy is perhaps the most striking: the singer of this group of melodic death metal between 2000 and 2014, Angela Gossow, combined naturally a feminine aesthetic with a typically male guttural vocal technique. In addition, her attitude has never been

15. The section "Nationalities and Warriors" the book published by Hill & Spracklen (2010) addresses precisely to the political fundamentalism in heavy metal.

seen in the world of heavy metal as someone wanting to replace a man, but with respect and admiration.[16] Since 2014 another woman, Alissa White-Gluz, has been the lead singer of the band.

Naturally, among the new bands and new audience room has been made so that women have also been interested in aspects of the classical world. The difference women's bands have made, as well as those male bands but far from the androcentric view of the first bands, has been a focus (Umurham 2014). For example, Shadow Icon in *Empire in Ruins* (Independent, 2011) pays attention to psychological and emotional cost of the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra, and by tackling the issue of the battle of Actium; they don't show interest in the violence of the war, but Mark Antony's introspective aspects of reflecting on personal decisions that led Rome to that situation. Nevertheless, these examples should not mislead about the eminently masculine character of the genre: women are still underrepresented and open homosexuality is scarce (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris & LeVine 2011: 14).

However, we should remember the case of Rob Halford, the Judas Priest vocalist and one of the godfathers of the heavy metal genre. Halford not only brought into fashion the leather outfits and costumes – from gay neighbourhoods in London –, but when he came out of the closet in 1990, he opened a wide debate about homosexuality in heavy metal.

Nevertheless, the question of the negotiation of the gender and sexuality in heavy metal transcends the scope of this paper and is the central object of other sociological studies (Walser 1993: 108–136; Spracklen 2010: 89–102). A line of work that itself seems meaningful in the frame of the studies of the reception of classics would be the role of these in shaping masculinity in heavy metal.

Are warriors' values such as camaraderie simply recognized in the classical models and serve as exempla or is there an active influence of the classics in the way heavy understands and constructs gender identity? Speaking of the reception, the answer to the last part of the question would be positive, and the relationship of the past with the present is undoubtedly bidirectional.

Neo-romantic spirit

The dialogue with the past occurs either because within it the values that the present considers necessary are recognised, because it enables criticism of the present, for nostalgia for a better time (Martindale 2013: 174), or because it offers a scenario

16. Information provided in personal conversation by Marina Solís de Ovando with whom I am indebted for this and other valuable contributions to my work.

of evasion. According to Parker (2008: 230), the Classical text becomes "a magic portal into a world of value otherwise inaccessible and lost."

When considering the scenarios of antiquity such as *loca amoena* (Brockliss, Chaudhuri, Haimson Lushkov & Wasdin 2012: 16–17) it is not only the longing for the past which is evident, but identity mechanisms are also activated. What are we in relation to them? In this sense Deeks (2013) has studied bands using the Nordic mythology and the landscapes of northern Europe on T-shirts, albums and other forms of merchandise. He has concluded that this imagery is used to reinforce the followers' sense of identity – not exclusively nationalist because the country of origin doesn't always coincide with that of evasion – and that this process occurs similarly to how it did in the poetry of Romanticism.

As already mentioned heavy metal's preference for the mysterious, nature and the folklore are elements that invite to talk of a 'neo-romantic' spirit. This would also frame the trend of anti-Christianity (Lucas, Deeks & Spracklen 2011: 286), satanic cults, the most exotic mythologies and, of course, the neo-paganism. An example of 'mythology' from the Old Testament is the well-known song "Creeping Death" by Metallica (*Ride the Lightning*, Megaforce/Elektra Records, 1984), which speaks of the ten plagues of Egypt.

Antiquity represents a scenario of identity, but it is also the other side of the coin, i.e., a form of otherness (Wood 2012: 166) distinguishing its followers from other 'mere mortals'. Often, artists who have chosen classic themes for their songs have done this in response to the search for scenarios away from the routine, and this has also led the bands to other settings and sources of inspiration: Nordic mythology – *Twilight of the Thunder God* (Metal Blade Records, 2008) by Amon Amarth –, the Middle Ages – *Medieval* (Sonido XXI, 1997) by Tierra Santa –, the Bible – *Visions of Eden* (Sanctuary Records, 2006) by Virgin Steele – or Tolkien universe – *Nightfall in Middle-Earth* (Virgin Records, 1998) by Blind Guardian –, for instance. There is no wonder then that some of the recognizable subgenres in metal today are the epic, the pagan and Viking metal, or Tolkien or pirate metal, to escape the banality of the modern world it makes no difference if it is through Thor or Zeus. As Campbell (2009: 111) points out, heavy is a genre with a marked tendency to intertextuality: "film, fiction, history, mythology: all can be found inspiring and underpinning the lyrical content of songs."

Heavy metal provides, therefore, a rich warrior and predominantly virile imagery. One which is escapist and fanciful, and also highly conducive to the development of different types of the classical hero presented below.

Three types of hero

A heavy metal is any metal or metalloid with a certain density and often harmful effects[17] and a heavy person is meant to be tough. The image that immediately identifies him, less often her, is that of a strong man, with long hair and dark clothing. He has the look of a warrior and that is the first reason – and a consequence – for which the epic heroes find their own territory in this music. Musically we think about the sharp sound of the electric guitars, the distorted bass guitars, the very rapid beating of the drums and the "emotionally extreme singing techniques" (Wallach, Berger & Greene 2011: 4) going from the cavernous growl to the sharpest falsetto. All this brings us back to the atmosphere of the battlefield. In this sense, Manowar goes so far as to call their fans 'metal warriors'; these call themselves 'brothers of metal'; and the fact that they have fans worldwide has earned them the epithet of 'warriors of the world'. Meanwhile, the official fan club of the American band Kiss is called 'Kiss Army'.

Besides a warlike spirit, the heavy metal fan boasts a noble character and a sense of superiority based on the firm defence of certain ethical values against the materialistic deviations of capitalism. The aristocratic spirit (in the truest etymological sense of 'the best') and the values of some tragic heroes are reflected in this.

We must not forget that the sensitivity of an Achilles, Odysseus or Aeneas – as misunderstood or solitary heroes by circumstance – is the same type of sensitivity that heavy metal expresses in many typical ballads of the genre. Thus, there is a tender heart beneath the armour of an iron warrior.

The epic hero

The best of the Achaean warriors was Achilles and to his anger Homer devoted the *Iliad*, making his name and fame (his *kleos*) immortal. We must not be surprised then that Achilles has its own tradition in heavy metal music. This has already been analyzed by Cavallini in several papers (2009, 2010), and has to be collected in these pages which, however, will try to pay attention to the songs and issues she has worked in to a lesser extent.

First, the song "Achilles Last Stand" by the British rock band Led Zeppelin (*Presence*, Swan Songs, 1976), the forerunner of some of the purely heavy compositions that have been made later. "Achilles Last Stand" is a reflection on the absurdity of war and homesickness. The issue is not specific to the *Iliad* but to the

17. About the expression and its first musical usages cf. Weinstein 1991: 18–20, also Cavallini 2010: 116.

Odyssey, where the *nostos* is the leitmotiv of the hero and where we found Achilles himself preferring the life of a simple man to the fame of a king obtained by a war (*Od*. 9, 485). In this song it is the title that gives the key for a classical reading, and without it, just the mention of Atlas in the last verse puts the listener on the right path. But neither reference is given in order to locate this story into another time or space. Only at the end, the nation longed for by the protagonist is given the name Albion. Thanks to this ancient-modern lack of definition, the message acquires a timeless dimension.

Undoubtedly, the band who performed the most famous and elaborate heavy version of the epic hero is Manowar. Their 28′ suite "Achilles. Agony and Ecstasy in eight parts" (*The Triumph of Steel*, Atlantic Records, 1992) focuses on some key moments of the *Iliad*, such as Hector's assault at the Achaean ships or the funeral of Patroclus. Joey DeMaio's lyrics presuppose a careful and scrupulous reading of the epic poem, sometimes paraphrasing it. Besides, this suite contains three instrumental parts: 'Funeral March', 'Armor of the Gods' or 'The Desecration of Hector's Body', whose implementation tries to evoke some features of the Homeric scenarios: the battle rage, the anger and the warrior's pain, among others. This issue, which is already a "classic" of heavy metal, has been well analyzed by Cavallini (cf. 2009 and 2010).

More recently the single "And there was silence" (2001) has been released by the German band Blind Guardian. This song, which forms part of the album *A Night at the Opera* (Virgin / Century Media, 2002), lasts 14 minutes and consists of 128 tracks in order to accommodate a large number of choirs and arrangements. The *Iliad* receives an original treatment here. The main originality is that the subject alternates the points of view of the Trojans and the Greeks, although the lead character is represented by Cassandra. Along with the different points of view, the almost cinematographic style stands out in the presentation of the different scenes. Some of them happen in parallel (as the initial scene showing Paris coming to Troy and the Greeks in the sacrifice of Iphigenia), others follow the order of events (Patroclus' death, followed by Hector's and later, the false withdrawal of the Greek army), others are introduced as a flashback, as is the case of the explanation of the background of the war with the scene of the judgment of Paris.

As it can be sensed, the song contains very precise allusions to the *Iliad*, but this does not mean anything new regarding the version of Manowar. The novelty and modernity of this song lies in the point of view. Giving voice to the character of Cassandra allows an update of the myth through empathy, as the contemporary sensibility clearly takes the side of the defeated.[18] In addition, she balances

18. There was the case of Manowar, ending his suite with the part called "The Glory of Achilles".

the masculine nature of the epic and of the heavy metal genre itself. The message repeated by the prophetess in the chorus is clear: "Misty tales and poems lost / all the bliss and beauty will be gone [...] it's the triumph of shame and disease / in the end-*Iliad*."

For their part, the American Warlord reappeared on the music scene after fifteen years of inactivity with the album *Rising out of the Ashes* (Drakkar Entertainment GmbH, 2002), which contains the song "Achilles' Revenge." As Cavallini (2010: 134) notes, scenes of brutality and slaughter of the song would be used to describe any war scenario. But the song contains more than that, explicitly based on the *Iliad*. The first verse is used as a hinge between the present and the distant past: "As time marches back to infinity." The lyrics describe Achilles in very Homeric terms as a "mighty" warrior who "sought the glory of war," and "carved his name into books of lore, Inmortal legend." The *kleos* and the name of Achilles reappear then in this song in all their splendour. Finally, an interesting allusion is made to Achilles like "the king of the dead in Acheron" and the motif connects again with this reference to the *Odyssey* made by Led Zeppelin.

Finally, the theme of Jag Panzer "Achilles" attracts our attention (*Casting the Stones*, Century Media, 2004). Performed after the movie *Troy* by Petersen, what is interesting is that, instead of the Homeric epic, it is the movie that serves as a source. The fact that Patroclus is mentioned as Achilles's cousin would be anecdotal if it were not for the evidence of that mechanism of transmission of classical motifs through mass media, without contact with the original. There are many heavy metal songs, previous to the film version, containing the warrior and 'murderer' Achilles, his ankle, his shield, his anger, his blood, his madness or even his paradox, as a title, many of which have appeared after 2004.[19]

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19. "Achilles" by Calibos (*Calibos*, Globus International, 1992), "Achilles Heel" by Strangehold (*Elemental*, Iscore, 1999), "Achilles Heel" by Zed Yago (*Pilgrimage*, RCA Records, 1989), "Achilles Heel I, II & III" by Edge of Sanity (*Crimson II*, Black Mark Production, 2003), "Portents of Achilles" by Hydra (*Phaedra*, Heretic Sound, 2003), "Achilles Last Stand" by Northwind (*Mythology*, Emi, 1987) or "Achilles Anger" by Warchild (*Theaters of Pain*, Independent, 2001). "Achilles" by Silence the Messenger (*Achilles*, Standby Records, 2013), "Achilles" by Sweet Savage (*Regeneration*, Grind that Axe, 2012), "Achilles Heel" by Blacksmith (*Time out of Mind*, Heaven and Hell Records, 2012), "Achilles Wrath" by Clairvoyant (*Time's Crime*, Independent 2009), "Blood of Achilles" by Benighted Soul (*Anesidora*, Independent, 2008), "Achilles the Warrior" by Black Century (*Shadow Man*, Independent, 2013), "Shield of Achilles I & II" by Dakesis (*Trial by Fire*, CapsAArx, 2011), "Achilles Paradox" by Memento Waltz (*Division by Zero*, Independent, 2013), "Achilles Sons" by Symbolic (*Scarvest*, Twilight Vertrieb, 2011), "Achilles the Back Breaker" by The Showdown (*Back Breaker*, Solid State Records, 2008), "Sons of Achilles" by Validor (*Dawn of the Avenger*, Iron on Iron Records, 2012), "The Rage of Achilles" by Written in Blood (*Written in Blood*, Independent, 2008), "Achilles Heel" by Agonia (*Unleash the Truth*, Independent, 2013) or "Achilles Fury (in Hector's Death)" by Ancestral (*The Ancient Curse*, Underground Symphony, 2007).

The other great warrior hero of the classical world whose feats were sung in the metal genre, has been a historical figure, but equally legendary: Alexander the Great. This issue has been studied by Umurham (2012) and Djurslev (2015). The former analyzes Iron Maiden's song "Alexander the Great" from the album *Somewhere in Time* (EMI/Capitol Records, 1986)[20] and examines: "how the music and lyrics receive and articulate distinct features of the classical material – namely, their focus on the individual hero and the emotional and psychological costs of war" (Umurham 2012: 129). He also pays attention to the sources of the musicians, whose creations not only collected fragments of classical texts (Plutarch, Arrian, Dio Cassius), but according to him, also glean from the German historiography and the British scholarship of the 19th century and from the representation of the characters and historical events in current media, such as comics or movies. With regard to the latter, the situation is parallel to that of Achilles: the figure of Alexander had been extolled before the movie by Oliver Stone, but versions have multiplied after it.[21]

However, regardless of the cinematographic element, Alexander the Great has interested the heavy metal continuously since 1986, thanks to Iron's Maiden song – as outlined by the thesis of Djurslev (2015)-. He embodies the typical features of the genre such as masculine power, unity and brotherhood of the community of its followers. Also, the king of Macedonia finds himself in the centre of a national debate about his identity and origin in Greece, as well as in Albania or in the Republic of Macedonia, and this is why different Greek bands, studied by Djurslev (2015: 137–138), have devoted their compositions to him. In these cases Alexander the Great is not an ideal reference, like Iron Maiden, but the national hero for all those who consider themselves his legitimate heirs.

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20. Although not the author of the lyrics of this song, the singer of the band, Bruce Dickinson, has a degree in Ancient History from the University of London.

21. "Alexander" by Insidead (*Ελευσις*, Noise head Records, 2013), "Alexander" by Marauder (*Elegy of Blood*, Pitch Black Records, 2012), "Alexander the Great" by Atlantic (*The Great Names of Past*, Independent, 2011), "Alexander the Great" by Melodius Deite (*Episode II: Voyage to the World of Fantasy*, Avatar Records 2014), "The Legend of Alexander" by Porphyra (*Faith*, *Struggle*, *Victory*, Independent, 2014), "The Apotheosis of Alexandros" by Sacred Blood (*Alexandros*, Pitch Black Records, 2012) or "Alexander the Great" by Iron Mask (*Hords of the Brave*, Lion Music, 2003), "Alexander" by Insidead (*Ελευσις*, Noise head Records, 2013), "Alexander" by Marauder (*Elegy of Blood*, Pitch Black Records, 2012), "Alexander the Great" by Atlantic (*The Great Names of Past*, Independent, 2011), "Alexander the Great" by Melodius Deite (*Episode II: Voyage to the World of Fantasy*, Avatar Records, 2014), "The Legend of Alexander" by Porphyra (*Faith*, *Struggle*, *Victory*, Independent, 2014), "The Apotheosis of Alexandros" by Sacred Blood (*Alexandros*, Pitch Black Records, 2012) or "Alexander the Great" by Iron Mask (*Hords of the Brave*, Lion Music, 2003).

The tragic hero

The presence of tragic heroes in heavy metal is less widespread than the warrior hero, but there are still important contributions such as the already mentioned band, Virgin Steele.

This American band dedicated nothing more and nothing less than two double albums to the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. *The House of Atreus* (T & T / Noise 1999–2000), which has been well studied by Liverani (2009), is a sort of conceptual opera. The term is appropriate because, in fact, this composition has been conceived as a show staged in Germany. *The House of Atreus* not only contains very precise references to Aeschylus verses, as would be expected in such an extensive work, but at the same time, it proposes a reading and interpretation, in contemporary key, of some aspects, such as the role of women, the individual responsibility or the anti-warmongering. So David Defeis' lyrics redeem characters like Clytemnestra and Electra, condemn Orestes (who commits suicide) as he cannot forget what he has done and deal with the curse that falls on the Atreus. The condemnation of this family and their crimes is compared with those of another contemporary American 'Dynasty': the Bush family (cf. interview with Defeis in Liverani 2009: 150).

In this sense it is worth referring to a parallel musical-theatre phenomenon: *The Seven* is the emblematic Hip Hop piece of the New Yorker Theatre, a theatre piece sung to the rhythm of rap. The work represents the update of *The Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus, moving the story to the struggles for power in the suburbs of the city. What is relevant is that it also emphasizes the theme of the family curse. The composer of the work, Will Power, is also referring, like Defeis in *The House of Atreus*, to the family saga of the Bush and the Iraq War.[22]

Another hero, whose tragedy has often been sung in heavy metal key, is Icarus. The reckless and daring son of Daedalus is not the protagonist of any preserved classic drama and its mythical history is known mainly from the *The Metamorphoses* (8, 183–235) by Ovid. In heavy metal, the popular British band Iron Maiden stands out again for including in its successful album *Piece of Mind* (EMI / Capitol / Sanctuary / Columbia Records, 1983) the "Flight of Icarus" song. It has been said that this song forces in a sense the myth, to turn it into a metaphor for the teenage rebellion (Campbell 2009: 118), and without denying that this is true, the remarkable thing is that it highlights its multiplicity of meanings and strength to evoke and cause different reactions.

In the *Encyclopedia Metallum* the entry of 'Icarus' as song title gives an enumeration of 138 results, many of which, however, are different versions and covers of the

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22. Cf. Interview with Steven Colbert in *The Colbert Report*: <http://willpower.tv/2009/06/15/will-power-on-the-colbert-report/> [26/09/2014].

Iron Maiden's "Flight of Icarus," or belong to less notorious bands. An exception is the Brazilian band Angra, their "Metal Icarus" (*Fireworks*, Paradoxx / CNR Music, 1998) is a very successful song of the genre and features Icarus as the character misunderstood by society whose death is mourned by the narrator.

Rebellion is also the most outstanding trait of the mythical figure of Prometheus, who has 142 entries to his name in the Encyclopaedia. The protagonist of the trilogy of Aeschylus has been extolled as a tragic hero in heavy metal, following a neo-romantic approach, derived from the literary treatment of the theme by Percey B. Shelley in the 1820 drama *Prometheus Unbound*. Virgin Steele's song "Prometheus the Fallen One" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* – Part II (T&T Records, 1995) reminds the benefactor of men for stealing fire, rebellion and pride with which he confronts the unjust tyranny of divinity ("Now I suffer the wrath / I suffer the pain for befriending man / Proud rebel thief, stealer of fire, I never kneel / I have chosen, I bleed for mankind / Watch me die, I am the god in man"); The Showdown's "Prometheus – The Fires of Deliverance" in *Backbreaker* (Solid State Records, 2008) presents the hero as a victim of the new regime; and Trivium's "Of Prometheus and the Crucifix" in *Shogun* (Roadrunner Records, 2008) explicitly identifies him with a Christ willing to resist and defeat his enemies ("won't / Make me cease to be / You've turned this scapegoat into / The lion that will devour you whole"). These readings of the myth choose to ignore the third part of the Aeschylus' trilogy, in which the reconciliation of the titan Prometheus with Zeus takes place, and privileges the defiance of the first.

So, what seems to appeal more to contemporary musicians regarding the tragic hero is, first, the very essence of his tragic condition – the inescapable nature of the curse, the condemnation of evil to perpetuate, the impossibility of breaking the wheel of the fate – and, secondly, the subversive potential of the mythical figures.

The adventurer hero

As seen in the examples given so far, the heavy metal world has paid attention to great heroic figures of the antiquity: on the one hand, Achilles and Alexander, as war heroes; on the other hand, the saga of the Atreides, and the dramas of Icarus and Prometheus as tragic heroes. It is not surprising, therefore, that the most illustrious representative of the adventurous hero, in this genre, is the protagonist of the *Odyssey*.

In 2002 Symphony X published their album *The Odyssey* (InsideOut Music). The last track, which gives it the title, lasts 24 minutes and is considered by their fans as the masterpiece of the band. Particularly noteworthy are the instrumentation, arrangements and accuracy of the lyrics. As much for its length, as its structure, which alternates choral parts with instrumental parts, it reminds us of the classic of

Manowar, "Achilles. Agony and Ecstasy in eight Parts" and it might be thought that Symphony X composed this *Odyssey* as a musical counterpart of that *Iliad*. Probably a comparative study of both would confirm this point. This paper limits its action to the emphasis of the balance of the two main parts of the homeric *Odyssey* in this song – the *nostos* and revenge – and to the band's effort to adapt the right of the king of Ithaca to the second one of them.

Allusions to the *Odyssey* are also found in other compositions such as "Ghost of the Navigator" (*Brave New World*, EMI / Sony / Portrait, 2000) by Iron Maiden, a song that Campbell analyses pointing out other literary debts, such as the *Rime of the ancient mariner* of Coleridge (2009: 119–120).[23] Another example is the song "Tales of Brave Ulysses" by Cream (Disraeli Gears, Reaction / Atco / Polydor, 1967) with lyrics by Martin Sharp and music by Eric Clapton, who was covered by doom metal band Trouble (Assassin / Single, Metal Blad Records, 1984).

The trackable data in the *Encyclopaedia Metallum* is also eloquent about the presence of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and the other adventurer heroes in heavy metal. According to this, there are at least 19 bands that match the name Odyssey, or compounds that include this term, such as the Mexican band Gilgamesh's Odyssey, who have mixed the Mesopotamian epic with the Mediterranean. Besides, there are at least 199 songs showing it in their title, such as the track by the Greek group Athlos, "Ulysses before the Gate of Hades" in the album *In the Shroud of Legendry – Hellenic Myths of Gods and Heroes* (Secret Port Records, 2009) in which the episode of necromancy is recreated, or the one by the German Ancient Gods, "Ulysses Life" in *Living in the Wrong Time* (Independent, 2013) in which it is recalled that the hero is "artful and cunny" and that it must still overcome obstacles to come back home.

Meanwhile, Jason is shown in the title of 76 songs; Hercules in 24; and if specific adventures like the Golden Fleece of the Argonauts, or the twelve labours of Hercules or Ulysses' sirens are searched for, the results are multiplied.

To conclude

The above examples represent only a minor part of the heavy production on Greco-Roman themes. Very representative heroes of myth and history were chosen for the study, as well as very well-known bands, since otherwise the material would have been incomprehensible. In addition, the most popular groups are precisely those trendsetters in the genre and those acting as intermediaries between the classical tradition and current recipients. The perception of the classics by the

23. The Iron Maiden themselves have a song with the same title, which includes lines of the poem.

majority of the public is largely derived from the readings of these bands, and the classics, in turn, contribute to the establishment and consolidation of the ideals of the consumer society, the masculinity, elitism, nationalism, etc., from the platform provided by a musical globalized phenomenon such as heavy. For its followers music becomes a means of communication between present and historical attitudes, a "locus for the articulation, contestation, and staff of negotiation, social, and political values" (Umurhan 2012: 128).

The reception of classics in heavy metal music, being a specific phenomenon, can help us understand more general trends. It can also illustrate aspects of antiquity, as well as the meaning of classics in contemporary times. And yet, such is Fletcher's thesis (2014), it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the genre itself has been set in part by the classical legacy.

The topic is also of interest because, as noted Umurhan (2014: 3), heavy relates to classical dialogically and uses the classic texts on equal terms with other contemporary sources, such as film, video -games or comics and graphic novels.

As a discipline reception should strive to explore phenomena that tell us something about the classics, that helps us illuminate some aspects of them and not just of modern works (Martindale 2013: 177), allowing us to read the classic through the modern (Wood 2012: 163). Can this be done with heavy? The examples given show that this material can start or form a meaningful dialogue with antiquity, either reinforcing established values, or revealing the subversive potential of mythology and history of Greece and Rome, and always providing a genuine insight into an area traditionally reserved for high culture.

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The videogame hero in his labyrinth

The hero in electronic gaming

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In this paper we analyze the main features of some of the most popular videogame characters in the recent years (that is to say, heroes, villains and anti-heroes), compared to classical Greco-Roman heroes, after reflecting on the consequences of the fact that a videogame hero only comes to life as an player's avatar who gets into the skin of the hero through the controls of the gamepad, usually in a single experience.

Keywords: hero, player, avatar, videogame, gameplay

1. Preface

In the thirty-plus years that videogames have been on the market, an endless number of characters have appeared that warrant the label of hero. Performing feats worthy of the heroic figures of Classical myth, the inhabitants of this new Olympus come from every type of origin and condition, as is fitting in a genre that draws from very diverse sources, in addition to the Classical.

It is no easy task to describe the characteristics of such a heterogeneous group, who apparently have nothing in common other than being the focus of certain stories, nearly always fantasies far removed from daily life – stories that fill the leisure hours of all kinds of players, glued to the console or the computer.

This study makes an attempt at this arduous, complex task of reflecting on the nature of the videogame hero; while this character undoubtedly repeats many of the expected traits and behaviors of mythical heroes (intentionally or unintentionally), it also goes well beyond this model, as we also see in other manifestations of so-called "popular culture."

Given that many hundreds of such characters form the ranks of this unique host, it is essential to begin our study with a small selection of these. For this

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purpose we look to certain classifications that are found on the Net, with lists of the most popular characters, either according to the webmaster or to user opinion.

The websites used as reference are: (1) *The 50 greatest video game characters*, <http://www.empireonline.com/features/50-greatest-video-game-characters>, with the top 50 heroes from the history of videogames; (2) *Top grandes héroes de la historia del videojuego*, <http://mentesynquietas.wordpress.com/2011/10/12/top-grandes-heroes-del-videojuego--%E2%80%93-5%C2%BA-entrega/>, a small selection of heroic creatures; (3) *Las 18 heroínas más carismáticas de los videojuegos*, <http://www.3djuegos.com/comunidad-foros/tema/14309635/0/las-18-heroinas-mas-carismaticas-de-los-videojuegos/>, with some of the most emblematic heroines from the world of videogames; (4) *Los 50 mejores villanos en videojuegos, según Guinness World Records*, <http://www.cinepremiere.com.mx/27202-los-50-mejores-villanos-en-videojuegos-segun-guinness-world-records.html>, with the top 50 villains according to Guinness; (5) *Los mejores villanos de los videojuegos*, <http://listas.20minutos.es/lista/los-mejores-villanos-de-los-videojuegos-352132/>, an open list of villains that contains 109 characters to date; (6) *Antihéroes, la naturaleza de los videojuegos*, an article from the journal *Zoom*, with a three-part compilation of antiheroes: <http://revistazoom.pe/nota.php?nota=255>, <http://revistazoom.pe/nota.php?nota=257> and <http://revistazoom.pe/nota.php?nota=263>.[1]

In particular, we are going to consider three types of characters that are the usual focal point of these stories that the player develops on the screen: heroes, villains and anti-heroes. Anti-heroes, as considered here, are characters who are presented as evil at the start of the game, but who are able to redeem themselves through their actions and to perform heroic feats. Diversity in the types of videogame heroes echoes the diversity seen in traditional epic heroes, according to Bowra (1952: 91) in his now classic study: "Just as there is more than one kind of human excellence, so there is more than one kind of hero."

A look through any of these lists reveals that many characters are genuine "classics" of the videogame, often starring in "sagas" made up of a number of releases under the same title. Although such heroes do not lose their essential personality in these series, many of their traits and characteristics have gradually adapted to the times and the tastes of the player. For our analysis, we also include certain characters who, though not usually found in these popularity lists, exhibit features that make them seem especially relevant to our study.

1. All the web pages referenced in this article were last visited on the 28th of November, 2019.

2. The role of the user/player: The concept of avatar

Before fully delving into the analysis of videogame heroes, we must pause for a moment to recall that these characters only come alive through the actions of a real person, the player, who executes a series of consistent actions, generally though activating a certain key or button on the videogame console, the PC keyboard or the joystick.

One of the essential features of the videogame, in contrast to other types of audiovisual products, is the user/player's decisive influence on how the experience unfolds (Pérez Latorre 2012a: 30). This is due to another characteristic feature of the videogame, that of interactivity, especially the "configurative" type, allowing the user/player to develop a game experience that is only minimally predefined by the game designers (Pérez Latorre 2012a: 30).

An essential concept for understanding the relationship between the player and the game that develops on screen, with which the player interacts, is called *gameplay.* Some authors describe this as a "prototypical game experience" for reaching some objective as designed by the game's developers (Pérez Latorre 2012a: 48), while other authors consider it the interaction between the rules of the game, the players in their effort to reach a certain objective, and the players' own preferences and skills (Juul 2011: 199–200).

In this regard, although the player participates in the story or plot, the objectives that must be reached are implicit in the game design, as well as certain adequate or suitable behaviors for meeting these objectives, which a good player must learn. These behaviors are indirectly anticipated in the game design.

When a videogame designer sits down to work, one of the first decisions to be made is whether the product's *gameplay* will be more or less open. This means that the designer must decide whether the "ways to play" and "ways to win" will be practically predetermined from the design itself – and the player need only to "discover" the ways that were intended for winning the game – or, if the design will be open, such that the player has more freedom to move through the game using behaviors that were not necessarily anticipated by the designer (O. Pérez Latorre 2012a: 53).

One of the aspects that reveals whether the gameplay is more or less open is if the game in question allows the choice of objectives. Thus, while the player chooses the objectives to be met in games like *Grand Theft Auto* or the *Sims,* in most adventure videogames, the player has only to meet objectives that are presented one after another in a strict order (cf. Pérez Latorre 2012a: 85).

Another essential concept for understanding the mechanics of most videogames is that of "avatar," that is, the player's explicit, concrete, and stable representation within the game (Pérez Latorre 2012a: 81). The basic features of this figure, from the visual and even characterological point of view, are often decided by the player at the start of the game.

Many games allow the player to configure aspects of his or her “avatar” that are much more decisive than the merely external, such as its level of experience (and therefore, the difficulty of the game itself), its number of lives, its health, etc.

Put differently, when we speak of a videogame hero, we must be very aware that we are speaking of a virtual being, the main character of a particular videogame, who is guided by a real human user/player that can decide to “personalize” the avatar’s appearance, personality and other aspects. This person must meet a series of objectives in order to pass through the different levels and eventually triumph, the ultimate goal of the game, for which he or she would ideally learn the most appropriate behaviors, as foreseen by the designer, for meeting the objectives.

This, of course, is the theory. In practice, it all depends on the skill and dexterity of the real player: Kratos, the protagonist of *God of War,* will not be the same when guided by a novice as when guided by an expert player. This means that, potentially, there will be as many Kratos and as many game experiences featuring Kratos as there are real-life players; this multiplicity increases exponentially in games that offer open gameplay.

For this reason, to speak of a videogame hero can be deceiving to some degree, if we accept this relationship between player and avatar, as described above. But this does not mean that we cannot put forward a basic characterization of the hero/avatar; we can legitimately suppose that there is an ideal, prototypical behavior of the user/player, and this is not affected by any imposed changes in appearance or character, which is no case should alter the basic essence of this main character.

In order to further complicate the scenario, we should keep in mind that videogames increasingly involve the figure of group subject/player, including cases of (1) the individual player controlling a group of characters as a team, (2) role-based videogames with a group hero, as in *Final Fantasy VII* or *Dragon Age*, and (3) the increasingly popular multi-user games, especially in their online format (Pérez Latorre 2012a: 82).

3. The videogame hero: Between reality and fiction

A common feature of any heroic adventure is the fact that the hero, following the typical schema of initiation rites (separation, initiation, return), must leave the world of daily life to a land of supernatural wonders, where he or she will perform heroic feats, facing mythical forces and obtaining a decisive victory, after which he or she will return to the world (Campbell 1993: 30 ff.).

This schema, however it is fleshed out, is what is repeated when a real player embodies the personality of a virtual hero who comes alive on the screen of the video console or computer, faces the challenges presented in the game, and achieves the established objectives, so that, after becoming the victor, he or she can cast off the virtual embodiment and return to the everyday world filled with the pride of having finished the game or having defeated some or other powerful enemy. Whereas in the world of myth, it is the hero's homeland that welcomes him with roars of cheers after he overcomes the trials that set him apart as a hero, in the world of the videogame player, it is the fellow players, whether real or virtual, who will cheer and congratulate the winner for having demonstrated control and mastery of the game. Of course, the opposite situation is also possible: just as in Classical mythology the hero may die – Heracles, when Deianeira gave him the shirt stained with Nessus the centaur's poisonous blood, Orpheus, at the hands of Thracian women, Hector, by Achilles' spear, Achilles by the arrows of Paris –, the same fate may fall to the videogame hero, except that in this case "death" is usually synonymous with the player/avatar's failure to meet the objectives of the game.

Bowra (1952: 118 and 128) suggests that the Classical hero manifests his heroic condition even when defeat or death brings him to a tragic end, something that cannot be said for the player who personifies a defeated videogame hero. In the opinion of Sánchez Parrón (2014: 20–21), in the virtual world context where video-game adventures occur, the initial idea of "victory/defeat" turns into "glory/failure" and "life/death," so that every action that helps attain victory becomes related to obtaining glory, and the main character takes on heroic connotations.

To look at videogame adventures in this light is to assume that many of them are reliving the epic environment of traditional mythic tales, from the moment when an individual (the player/avatar) faces a hostile environment recreated on the game screen, often alone. This individual protagonist, in confrontation with his or her surroundings, performs a series of feats that not only produce mastery over the scenario, but transform the player into a hero; personal glory is attained through a final action that confirms him or her as a hero who enjoys the recognition of the other characters (namely, the other participants in the game) (Sánchez Parrón 2014: 22).

Videogames produce a peculiar relationship between reality and fiction, leading certain authors to call this kind of electronic entertainment *half-real* or even *half-fictional,* in the sense that, in every videogame, the real part are the rules that provide the framework for the players' action, and the fact of winning or losing the game; the fictitious part are the actions that take place on the screen. Thus, playing a videogame is interacting with real rules while imagining a fictitious world (Juul 2011: 1).

The wondrous, faraway or exotic worlds of the myth correspond to the fictitious world that is created on screen in the videogame; the user/player must become immersed in this world in order to face the challenges that the game presents and to try to emerge victorious.

The fiction of videogames is projected through diverse means – through the graphic section, the sound, the text, the warning messages and the rules of the game – and while the rules of the game may function independently of the fictional aspects, the latter depend entirely on the former. Likewise, this fiction is to a large degree subjective, ambiguous and evocative. Aside from the explicit elements of the game design that help recreate the world where the videogame adventure takes place, the player fills in gaps in this world – an essential feature of fictitious worlds is that they are incomplete. From this point of view, given that fictitious worlds depend largely on the imagination of the player, different players will also imagine different fictitious worlds. In terms of the level of representation of the fictitious worlds of a videogame (or of a game in general), we find everything from abstract games, which in fact do not represent anything but simply consist of their own rules (e.g. checkers or chess, among traditional games), to games with organized and more or less incoherent worlds, where there are certain aspects of the game or parts of the fiction world that cannot be easily explained (Juul 2011: 121–133). Of course, there are certain types of games such as adventure games, where the level of realism, particularly in the latest releases, is quite contrary to what we are saying, leaving little to the player's imagination. Naturally, this impression of realism is greater in 3D game environments.

With regard to the role of imagination in videogames, it should be noted that something similar occurs in mythology, since the reader or listener must use imagination to fill in aspects of the mythical world that are not addressed or made explicit in the story.

4. The role of time in the videogame story

A particularly complex aspect with regard to the fiction worlds of videogames is the time factor.[2]

To start, it should be noted that time within the game is almost always chronological. Both flash-backs and flash-forwards are problematic: an interactive flash-back could lead to the problems of the time machine, that is, that actions in the past would rule out actions of the present; and a description of events to come could eliminate the significance of present actions.

2. For a discussion of time in videogames, see Pérez Latorre (2012a: 118–123) and Juul (2011: 141–156).

The predominance of videogames with this linear chronological format corresponds to the narrative structure of most traditional games, beginning with "start" and reaching a number of different endings through a series of simultaneous or consecutive steps that lead to one end or another.

According to Sánchez Parrón (2014: 20), in progression videogames – that is, where one or more narrative threads are developed through controlling a certain character or group of characters and the character's interaction with the environment –, the narrative schema is also linear, and only one of the different endings is considered to be the proper end to the story, and can be reached if the player performs more or less exactly the actions that the designers considered to be correct; the rest of the possible endings are related to not meeting the objectives, that is, to defeat or death of the main character.

In fact, videogame designers have ways to refer to past actions that are important for understanding the present, such as the insertion of cut-scenes, that is, short, non-interactive scenes that are inserted in the middle of the game and provide different types of information (e.g. the objectives of the mission that is about to take place).

On the other hand, time within the game may be left entirely up to the player, that is, game time can actually "stop" until the player comes up with the answer for getting through the current phase of the game and passing to the next level. This is typical of most classic graphic adventures, and, since the reference point or center is the subject/player, one speaks of "central temporality."

However, in many of today's videogames – with notable forerunners in some of the now classic graphic adventures – no longer are designers so understanding toward the player, and time within the adventure goes on mercilessly, regardless of the doubts and tribulations of the subject/player's avatar. In this case, we speak of "noncentral temporality," since time within the game is independent from the player's action.

One curious form of "playing with time" happens in turn-based strategy games: one of the players executes several actions while the other remains inactive, waiting for his or her turn, thus reproducing the typical format of chess games, though it has little to do with the real mechanics of a confrontation on the battlefield.

Additionally, with regard to time sequencing, videogames tend to include cyclical or repetitive temporality, where players' faults are often penalized by setbacks in the game experience. However, the trend more and more is toward linear temporality experiences. This means of avoiding boring redundancies is more typical of games with quite open gameplay, than of those where the gameplay is rigid. In general, games from the *shooter* genre make the most use of redundancy to penalize the unskilled player, although there are ways to avoid cyclical temporality by using penalties other than sending the player back to the start of the phase, for example, leaving the character wounded or not letting him gain experience points, as in *Fable II*. Other factors that influence the temporality of the game are how easily the progress of the game can be saved and recovered after one is penalized, and the actual difficulty of certain scenes or levels of play.

In the world of mythical narrative, the use of time has little to do with the functioning of time in videogames as described above. Even though we are accustomed to chronological narrative in mythology, the narrator can insert flashbacks and flashforwards, without distorting the content that is being narrated.

In addition to time, space is another aspect to be considered when analyzing the mechanics of play. We omit this question here so as to not stray too far from the essential object of this paper. Regarding this question, the reader is referred to Pérez Latorre (2012a: 124 ff.) and Juul (2011: 164 ff.).

5. Toward a definition of the videogame hero as compared to the classical hero

5.1 The videogame adventure, a story in the making

A fundamental difference between myths or traditional stories, and more current forms of popular culture such as cinema, comics, or in our case, videogames, is that the former tell of things past, of events familiar to the community where the myth or hero is an icon, while current forms of popular culture aim for the unpredictable, for not knowing what is going to happen, for inventiveness in the plot (Eco 1975: 260–262).

In the specific case of videogames, although we have read the user's manual and know the background of the hero whose virtual personality we are going to acquire, when we begin a videogame experience we approach something yet to be constructed, something radically new. And although the rules of the game have pre-determined the route to be followed in order to reach ultimate success, the player/avatar will have to perform the actions required to ensure that success, and quite truthfully, nothing guarantees that the adventure will come to a happy ending, if one is unable to master the precise behaviors for achieving that goal.

The hero of Classical myth, however, is presented to us as a character with fixed, eternal characteristics and great virtues, who has a history behind him, now past, already closed, which explains his present greatness and even his own physiognomy (Eco 1975: 260). This contrasts with the opinion of Campbell (1993: 337), who thinks that the mythological hero is the champion not of past deeds, but of deeds yet to be done: "The mythological hero is the champion not of things become but of things becoming."

By contrast, heroes and superheroes of popular culture are undergoing constant renewal. Any videogame hero will only progress and become more powerful to the extent that we are able to make him or her progress in the game. Moreover, in the case of a saga, the main character's appearance and powers may even change with each new release, and only the videogame designers know how the great heroes of our favorite games will emerge in the next phase.

However, in the case of classic, "renowned" videogame characters, who star in sagas with multiple releases and have millions of followers, they end up becoming a kind of archetype, similar to the heroes of comics (Eco 1975: 262–263). They are formed by the sum and compendium of a number of virtues and collective expectations, acquiring an emblematic stability, without this ruling out openness to novelty, or their ability to evolve in new releases.

5.2 Toward democratization of the heroic condition

In the Classical world, in order to be gifted with extraordinary powers or qualities, the hero had to be of divine origin, the direct or indirect descendant of a union between god and mortal (De Vries 1963: 211–212). This automatically distanced him from both the divine condition and the human condition, existing as another species in its own right.

In this regard Kerényi (2009: 24 ff.) claims that, though heroes received a cult, they were by no means gods, yet neither were they human beings in the ordinary sense. Regarding the partly divine nature of the hero, Bowra's basic idea (1952: 94) is that the heroes of the traditional epic were essentially human beings, though able to surpass the ordinary limits of man. This type of hero, with oversized human qualities, comes after the heroes of preheroic poetry, whose powers were based essentially on magic (Bowra, 1952: 91–92).

However, in the world of videogames, the heroic condition is not so dependent on birth or belonging to a blood line descended from a god. Quite the contrary, the leading characters of videogames differ widely in their origin, including a few that are sons of a god, some who are absolutely normal human beings, others with the appearance of an animal (but have a human soul, as in the fables) and those who simply inhabit more or less remote extraterrestrial worlds.

Despite our early remarks, an authentic "democratization" of the heroic condition already took place in the ancient world, when this status was given not only to military figures who fought and died for their nation, for example, but also to philosophers, poets and benefactors of the city who had recently died (cf. in this regard, Jones 2010). This began to occur especially in the 4th century BC, when individuals or whole communities "heroified" persons whose merits had nothing to do with military glories or exploits (Jones 2010: 48 ff.).

One of the best examples of a videogame hero who is a perfect copy of Classical heroes, the son or descendant of gods, is Kratos, featured in the famous saga, *God of War*, already in its eighth release. Kratos is a Spartan warrior, the son of Calisto and Zeus, who stars in epic confrontations with other heroes, such as Hercules, Theseus and Perseus, or with mythological creatures, like harpies, minotaurs and gorgons, or even the Greek gods Ares, Poseidon and Zeus.

Kratos' behavior contrasts with the behavior of Classical heroes, who were conscious that fighting against a god was not like fighting with other heroes or men, being doomed to failure (cf. Bowra 1952: 125).[3]

Also belonging to the world of classical heroes is Hercules, who became a videogame character in *Hercules Action Game*, from Disney Interactive, with versions for PlayStation and GameBoy. The videogame Hercules has more to do with the popular Disney movie by the same name, than with the well-known Classical sources.

An immortal is also featured in the role videogame, *The Nameless Ones.* This character has lived many lives in the Planescape multiverse, but has forgotten everything about them, including his own name. Through the course of the game, several characters who played some part in the past lives of the protagonist will join him in his journey through the city of Sigil and other realms of existence, so as to reconstruct that past life whose memories have been lost, clearly a quite platonic set-up.

By contrast, we know little of the birth of Mario, the fictional character designed by Japanese designer Shigeru Miyamoto for a vast number of platform games, and who has become the icon of the Nintendo company. In 1983, in the videogame *Mario Bros,* we find him accompanied by a brother, Luigi, both of them characterized as Italian-Americans. Beginning with this game, Mario is represented as a plumber (in previous games he appears as a carpenter).

As for Link, the warrior featured in the successful saga *The Legend of Zelda,* by Nintendo and also created by Shigeru Miyamoto, we know that he is a young Hylian, somewhere between the age of ten and twenty – depending on which release of the saga we are speaking of. He lives in the kingdom of Hyrule, a fantasy kingdom created by the goddesses Din, Nayru and Farore. In this kingdom, those similar in appearance to human beings belong to the race of the Hylians. Princess Zelda belongs to the Hylian royal family, which rule over Hyrule with justice and

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3. In any case, to find extensive information related to videogames from any era, we recommend two very complete databases: *Mobygames* <http://www.mobygames.com>, which contains data not only from a game's different versions, but also a full description of each, and even what the press reported at the time about the game in question; and *GameFAQS*, <http://www.gamefaqs.com/>.

kindness. She must be rescued by Link, with whom she appears to have a romantic relationship.[4]

Dr. Gordon Freeman, the main character of the videogame series *Half-Life,* works as a theoretical physicist in an ultra secret research center called Black Mesa, located somewhere in New Mexico. We know that he is from Seattle, Washington, and in the first installment of the saga he is at least 27 years old. Although in the game he basically will have to fight against alien and human forces, following a failed experiment, what is remarkable about this character in comparison to other saga heroes is his occupation, a theoretical physicist. His behavior in the game, however, is more like that of a soldier; *Half Life* belongs to the genre of Action games called *First Person Shooter.*

As for videogame heroines,[5] one of the most well-known is undoubtedly Lara Croft, protagonist of the adventure game saga called *Tomb Raider.* She is presented as an English archeologist and adventurer, whose stories take place among old tombs and ruins. A complete, detailed biography is provided. Accordingly, she was born in 1968 in England, the daughter of Richard and Amelia Croft. At the early age of nine, she survived a flying accident in the Himalayas, in which her mother died. After walking for ten days, she reached a bar in Kathmandu, where she managed to telephone her father. From this time on she begins a series of trips with her father, from one archeological site to another, until, at the age of fifteen, Lara's father disappears under strange circumstances, his remains never found. After a long legal battle with her uncle, she manages to take ownership of her father's possessions.

Among the nonhuman heroes of videogames, we point to *Sonic the Hedgehog,* SEGA icon, and featured in the saga which bears his name. Sonic is a blue hedgehog, around the age of fifteen, one yard long and weighing 75 pounds. His main identifying feature is his ability to run.

Set in a remote, unknown planet called Oddworld, *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* is a PlayStation game starring Abe, of the Mudokon race, who are actually slaves with a humanoid appearance. Abe works in the RuptureFarms meat processing plant, run by the dominating race of that world, the Glukkons. This rather atypical hero will have to lead his people to freedom once it is discovered that, in the meat factories where they are working, they themselves will be the raw material for a new product.

On the other hand, endowment with extraordinary qualities is inseparable from the heroic condition. These qualities will ultimately make the hero an exceptional being that can perform exploits and carry out all kind of adventures (Bowra 1952:

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4. An interesting reflection on the hidden philosophy behind the different installments of *The Legend of Zelda* is offered by Cuddy (2008).

5. Regarding the presence of action heroines in modern forms of popular culture, cf. Knight (2010).

97). As these qualities alone are often insufficient, both ancient and modern heroes typically seek the aid of all kind of instruments, often in the form of weapons. In the case of ancient heroes, we may think of Heracles and his club or Paris and his mastery of bow and arrow, with which he killed Achilles. In the case of videogames, the weapons are more or less fantastic, and are used by the player to progress through the game; their acquisition increases the player's power and aids in the achievement of game objectives.

In the videogame world, the player also finds an incalculable aid for meeting the game's challenges in the tutorials, especially when the player is a beginner. Additionally, throughout the game, icons, messages and indications often appear on the screen, offering guidance for the mission that is to be performed. Unfortunately for the ancient heroes, they had no such visual help, a feature of modern interactive systems, while on their missions.

The hero Kratos is credited with all the valor and boldness of a great epic hero, though also a good share of cruelty and cold blood. He receives from the hand of Ares god of war what will become one of his most characteristic weapons, the Blades of Chaos, which he wears attached to his arms with chains. Nevertheless, he must use other weapons to meet his objectives. Thus, in order to destroy Ares, as Athena reveals to him, he must first obtain a fantastic weapon, Pandora's box, found in Pandora's Temple, which is chained to the back of Cronos the Titan in an immense desert.

Elsewhere, Pit, the young winged protagonist of *Kid Icarus,* is typically armed with the bow and arrows provided to him by Palutena, goddess of the kingdom of light. He will have to face the forces of darkness, led by Medusa, and recover three essential weapons that formed the basis of Palutena's power before they were stolen by Medusa: the Mirror Shield, the Arrows of Light and the Wings of Pegasus. Once these weapons are regained, Pit can begin his assault on Sky Kingdom, defeat Medusa and rescue Palutena. Another of the hero's fundamental tools is a hammer with magical powers, which Pit can use to bring the stone statues of the soldiers of Palutena's army back to life, clearly a copy of Mjölnir, the war hammer of the Germanic god Thor.

Link, the main character of the *Legend of Zelda* saga, is considered to be the best hero from Nintendo, despite his youth and modesty. His main virtue is his legendary valor that will lead him to confront all kind of dangers, for which he will find aid in many different objects, including the Master Sword, or "Sword of Hyrule," a magical sword that the hero will use to face his rival Ganondorf, a great wizard with much strength and cunning. The Master Sword existed first as the so-called Divine Sword, which was transformed into the Master Sword after having acquired the energy of the three Sacred Flames and after absorbing the remains of the Herald of Death. In addition, Link will make use of the Triforce of Courage, which magnifies the hero's courage and protects him from black magic. The Triforce of Courage, along with the Triforce of Power and the Triforce of Wisdom, make up the Golden Triforce, a magical object symbolized by three golden triangles that represent the three great powers with which the goddesses Din, Nayru and Farore created the world.

If there is any example where the tool/weapon is inseparable from the hero, it is the case of Samus Aran, heroine of the videogame series *Metroid,* who wears a kind of exoskeleton, her Power Suit, in order to carry on her struggle against the space pirates that threaten the galaxy. The Power Suit protects her from most of the dangers that she encounters, and is equipped with all kinds of weapons: on one arm it bears a cannon, which can shoot a burst of energy at long range, and a large number of missiles. Moreover, this suit can turn into what the game calls a *Morph Ball,* allowing its wearer to become a rolling sphere and pass through narrow spaces such as tunnels and holes. Additionally, in the release *Metroid II*: *The Return of Samus,* the character takes a vessel with her, called *Gunship,* that allows her to hold on to her advances, regain her health and recover munition when the situation so requires.

Nonetheless, even though the hero may be equipped with some weapon, at times this is insufficient for the challenges that must be faced, and he or she must make use of a whole panoply of inherent character qualities.

Thus, in the well-known saga *Prince of Persia,* even though the prince bears a scimitar as his main weapon in the game's principal releases, the primary skills he must use to meet his objectives are acrobatic: leaping, climbing, etc., typical of platform games. Furthermore, since puzzle solving is included among the game's challenges, intelligence becomes a far-from-negligible instrument.

In the case of *Half Life*, a first-person shooter game starring Dr. Gordon Freeman, the hero must face aliens and government soldiers from the HECU unit who try to stop him from leaving the laboratory and reaching the surface. The hero is not only expected to know how to handle all kinds of firearms, but must use logic to overcome the obstacles and difficulties that his enemies put before him. The game presents puzzles, very complex situations that endanger the hero's health and possibilities for survival; the player must concentrate in order to avoid the obstacles and find the most suitable way to get out without being harmed.

On other occasions, the hero does not need tools or weapons *per se* in order to perform feats, but has some particular characteristic quality that is enough (Bowra 1952: 100–101). This occurred in the classical myth of Ulysses with his cunning – in fact, as Montiglio (2011: 1) points out, ever since the 5th century AD, the most notable role of Ulysses is that of wise man –,[6] and Achilles with his speed in running, among others.

6. For this reason, Montiglio devotes his paper to the story of "his philosophical impersonations," since many schools of philosophy took note of Ulysses and made him and his behavior an example of their own ethical doctrines.

In this way, in the world of videogames, Mario uses his own creativity more than tools or weapons in order to meet his objectives, taking advantage of everything within reach. Featured in a platform game, he is able to get to new levels mainly by walking, running, jumping and climbing over a series of platforms or cliffs, overcoming enemies that he encounters, while collecting objects needed to finish the game. By contrast, in Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros saga*, our friendly, good-natured plumber turns into a fighter. As is typical of fighting games, the objective is to drive the opponent from the scenario; here again, the player's skill in hand-to-hand combat takes precedence over the use of tools or weapons.

Even though we have offered very diverse examples, we can suggest another trait that seems typical of many videogame characters – and which separates them completely from the Classical hero model. In videogames the heroic condition is open to individuals who initially are absolutely normal – Mario the plumber, Gordon Freeman the doctor in Physics, Lara Croft the archeologist. These characters' abilities are neither some extraordinary, Heracles-type strength, nor are they the superpowers of, say, the X-Men.

This implies considerable humanization[7] and "democratization" of the heroic condition, and finds an important precedent in the superheroes of comics and graphic novels, another common ground between these two products of popular culture. Eco (1975: 288–289), examining the world of comics, already distinguished between heroes with otherworldly powers, such as Superman and The Manhunter from Mars, and normal human beings with characteristics heightened to their maximum degree, such as Batman and Robin.

In this way, videogames redefine the very concept of hero, because normal human individuals acquire this condition when they make an extraordinary effort or place their life in danger for a just cause, or simply when they demonstrate unusual courage. They thus become worthy of praise and admiration and their behavior gains the status of model or exemplary.

5.3 The hero as a man of action: The purposes of heroic action

An essential aspect of both ancient and modern heroes is an unstoppable inner drive that impels them to overcome challenges and obstacles, to triumph over powerful enemies or terrible monsters, or simply to fight against adversity in any

7. An extreme case of humanization of the videogame hero is Wander, featured in *Shadow of the Colossus*, who must use a number of acrobatic maneuvers in order to triumph over the Colossi, pacing himself and resting after making great efforts, just as any normal person would do. On this point, see Pérez Latorre (2012a: 93).

of its forms, in other words, to perform tribute-worthy acts by which they may aspire to the condition of hero:

> Though the hero's first and most natural need is to display his prowess and win the glory which he feels to be his right, he is ready to do so for some cause which does not immediately concern his personal interest but attracts him because it gives him a chance to show his worth (Bowra 1952: 102)

Nevertheless, what distinguishes the Classical hero from the modern hero, in our case the videogame hero, is his ultimate reason for behaving in this way. On one hand, the Classical hero has been endowed from birth to death with traits that make him a hero, and his victory over obstacles, the sum of his acts, are a way to reaffirm his superhuman dimension, considering that the Classical hero is an ideal representation of an entire group (Sánchez Parrón 2014: 23). The collective component of heroic action is produced when, according to Campbell's stages of heroic adventure, the hero returns and is reintegrated into society, which is indispensable for "the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world, and which, from the standpoint of the community, is the justification" for the hero's long retreat from the world (cf. Campbell 1993: 36).

On the other hand, the videogame hero, at the start of the game, is only a potential hero, typically represented as the individual, solitary hero, whose struggle, achievement, and victory over dangers and enemies, are his or her only way to not only confirm a prior heroic condition, but to actually attain it.[8] In videogames we witness a genuine modernization of the Classical model of hero (Sánchez Parrón 2014: 23).

Although this may reveal the ultimate motivation behind the hero's acts, in any ancient or modern heroic adventure, the hero's acts always seek to accomplish a specific objective (Bowra 1952: 105), which may be anything from the attempt to become a god and gain immortality, to other more "prosaic" goals such as rescuing the damsel in distress, or simply, mere survival. The typology is quite broad in this aspect, because what really matters is not the motive, but the play of strength and strategies that are applied to meeting the objective; these are what actually qualify the hero, whether ancient or modern, as an extraordinary being.

In *Half Life*, Freeman's fundamental objective is to escape from the Black Mesa complex, where the failed experiment has triggered the series of confrontations that must be faced by our hero. But the ending is unexpected. In Chapter 18, *Nihilanth,*

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8. This struggle does not always consist of overcoming outward enemies through the use of courage or daring. In games like the *Sims*, "the main conflict is the subject's conflict within, an internal struggle where the 'adversary' is the character's own personality" (cf. Pérez Latorre 2012a: 75).

after the leader of the extraterrestrials from planet Xen is destroyed, the game does not end, but Freeman is teleported to another place where he faces a mysterious character, G-Man or "the briefcase man." G-Man congratulates him on his fine accomplishment and offers him a job, which, if Freeman rejects, he will have to face a battle that he cannot win. Thus, depending on what the player chooses, the game may have one ending or another. If he accepts the job, the story will continue in the next episode of the saga; if he does not accept, the character is teletransported without weapons before a squad of Xenians, by which we assume that our hero dies.[9]

Mere survival is usually the objective of heroes featured in an entire subgenre of videogames called *Survival Horror,* where the main character finds himself in a gloomy, claustrophic and usually dimly lit scenario, unfamiliar to him, and must face all kinds of creatures typical of horror films.[10] This struggle to survive becomes truly dramatic in videogames with a zombie theme, popularized in our day by TV series such as *The Walking Dead*.[11] Within an apocalyptic context, the hero tries to save himself/herself, and often some of the other few remaining human survivors. This is the case of many videogames such as *Dead Rising*, which features photojournalist Frank West. West must escape from a shopping mall infested with zombies in the fictional town of Willamette, Colorado, which is under quarantine by the National Guard. His objective is to stay alive at least 72 hours so that he can be rescued by the helicopter piloted by his friend Ed DeLuca. In this case, the mere struggle to survive is complemented by the daring journalist's goal of discovering what is behind the strange epidemic outbreak.

In the *God of War* saga, the *Chains of Olympus* installment takes place during the ten years when Kratos is in the service of the gods, in a series of feats that remind us of Hercules' assignments in the Classical world.[12] The objective is to complete the series of enterprises, which, with the help of the gods, are to free him from the nightmares that have tormented him ever since he was tricked into killing his wife and daughter by war god Ares. However, as Persephone warns him when she is defeated by Kratos, his suffering will never come to an end.

Yet in the first installment of the saga, the *God of War* game itself, after Kratos returns to the underworld, seizes Pandora's box from Ares and opens it, he grows considerably and is able to face the war god from an equal standing. The result of this confrontation is the death of Ares and Kratos' becoming a god, namely, a new

9. Cf. the *Wikipedia* article: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Half-Life_%28video_game%29>.

10. Person's study (2009) of this videogame genre is foundational.

11. As for the influence of zombie films on present-day popular culture, cf. Bishop (2010).

12. Regarding this game in particular, see Noel, Dale & Brothers (2008).

god of war. In fact, in the game *God of War: Ghost of Sparta,* we see him acting in this newly acquired function.[13]

As for Link and the *Legend of Zelda* game, the objective is to rescue princess Zelda, kidnapped by evil Ganondorf. Zelda's nursemaid Impa is charged with finding a brave soul who will rescue her and help restore the kingdom from the reigning chaos.

The more primitive version of the popular Mario game had a similar objective, when he was still called Jumpman. In fact, the main character of *Donkey Kong,* from 1981, had to do all he could to rescue young Pauline, who had been carried off by the gorilla Donkey Kong.

Similarly, to a certain extent the young angel Pit, from *Kid Icarus,* also must rescue a certain "lady in distress," Palutena queen of light, imprisoned by Medusa in the Palace in the Sky.

The role of defending the weak against the affronts of evil characters is typical of any comics-superhero-turned-videogame-hero, often influenced by the cinema version.[14] This is the case of Batman, featured in a large number of videogames, such as *Batman* from Atari Games, 1990, where he faces the evil Joker in order to save Gotham; or *Batman begins,* inspired by the movie with the same name. Among the number of games based on this character, particularly interesting is a 2009 release, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, inspired from the original comic strip and very well received by reviewers. Here once again the hero must face the threat of his eternal enemy, the Joker, who has let himself be captured in order to be committed to the Arkham Asylum, where he finds and frees some of his accomplices. In this regard, the role of protector that is seen in many of these characters (perhaps more easily recognized in superheroes who reappear in videogames) is a proper reflection of the original meaning of a hero, not only as a mythological character, but also in the strictest etymological sense.

5.4 Regarding the hero's individualism

A consubstantial trait of both Classical and modern heroes is their individualism, in the sense that their glory is based on acts performed mainly by themselves. Even if they are accompanied by a group of other important characters, the hero's heroic virtues make him stand out above them, and he is of course their leader. In fact, Bowra (1952: 105) suggests that when the hero is a king, who has others under him

13. Regarding this release of the well-known saga, cf. Leng (2010).

14. Regarding the ethical reasons that motivate the acts of superheroes, see Morris and Morris (2005).

and is responsible for their destinies, he cannot show all of his heroic qualities, given that heroic action is assumed to have a basically individual quality. As examples of collective enterprises in Classical mythology, we may recall such as the quest of the Argonauts in search of the golden fleece, led by Jason, or the Calydonian boar hunt, whose most notable characters are Atalanta and Meleager.

In the case of videogames, although the hero interacts with other characters, the struggle against his enemies or his effort to meet the objectives for going to the next level are basically an individual enterprise. The hero, as the player's avatar, is responsible for overcoming the obstacles and traps of the game, for defeating rivals and solving any puzzles presented, applying all of his or her wisdom and especially skill – meaning those of the hero/player. This will depend on the hero acquiring new powers or weapons that will help him overcome new challenges involved as the game progresses, and that will be required in order to reach the final objective of the game.

Nonetheless, there is a fundamental difference between individualism in the videogame hero and in the classical hero. Although the classical hero could perform feats alone, he did so in representation and defense of the entire community, he was therefore an idealized representation of this community – perhaps Hector, more than Achilles, would be the best Classical representative of this type of hero, more concerned about his homeland, his city and his family than about his own glory (cf. Bowra 1952: 112). However, in the usual videogame experience, where the player joins the stream of the narrative through his or her avatar, this collective aspect of the Classical hero's exploits is practically excluded. This is actually nothing more than a clear illustration that in a world like ours, meaning is found in the individual, not in the group. In this regard, Campbell (1993: 388) emphasizes that in contrast to times past, when all meaning was found in the group and not in one's own individual expression, today everything is based on the individual, not on the group:

> The problem of mankind today, therefore, is precisely the opposite to that of men in the comparatively stable periods of those great co-ordinating mythologies which now are known as lies. Then all meaning was in the group, in the great anonymous forms, none in the self-expressive individual; today no meaning is in the group – none in the world: all is in the individual.

Of course, there are also degrees in this matter of the hero's individualism. In *Half Life,* the main character is absolutely Dr. Gordon Freeman, who is so uncommunicative that he never actually speaks in the entire game, leading many fans to suppose that he is mute.

A hero like Kratos is the star of *God of War,* but his strength and power would be less if he did not receive the help of a god here and there, particularly Athena.

Link, the main character of *The Legend of Zelda,* is inconceivable without the help of princess Zelda; although she is the "damsel in distress" that must be saved, she is by no means a minor character.[15] She is the human incarnation of the goddess Hylia and part of the royal family of Hyrule. While Link possesses the Triforce of Courage, she bears the Triforce of Wisdom, in addition to having other extraordinary powers, such as telepathy, precognition, arrows of light and teleportation.

In *Super Mario Bros,* although the leading character is the likable plumber Mario, since the release of *Mario Bros* he has been accompanied by a younger (but taller) brother, Luigi, characterized by a cap and a green shirt, in contrast to his brother's red shirt. Both of them participate in rescuing the damsel in distress, in this case, princess Peach. The novelty here is that we have two characters who can act with certain autonomy, they can thus be activated independently through the use of a second control, or using the multiplayer system, which will be discussed later.

In fact, the different ways of interacting with these two characters are another of the game's peculiar features. For example, in *Super Mario Galaxy 2,* Luigi can substitute Mario, if the player so chooses. In releases such as *New Super Mario Bros*, *New Super Mario Bros Wii* and *Super Mario 3D World,* Luigi may be controlled by a second player using the multiplayer system.

An important new twist regarding the role of hero is seen in the genre of strategy videogames and their different subgenres.[16] In this case we shift from the hero/player, whether in first or third person, who with or without help must fight for himself against untold enemies, traps, obstacles and so on, to a role similar to that of a general, monarch, emperor or political leader who directs an army or a people in meeting their objectives. In other words, we find the figure of the collective hero who is the brains behind the group that follows his directives. Nonetheless, if we continue to equate the player to the prototypical hero, the player in the role of leader or head of an army or civilization reproduces some of the behaviors of the archetypal hero, as identified by Raglan (1975: 192), namely: he can become king, and govern for a time without incidents, establishing laws, later he may lose the favor of the gods and of his subjects and be expelled from the throne and the city.

Strategy games are classified as either real-time or turn-based; these characteristics determine to a large degree not only how the game is played, but also the player's role and manner of acting. Turn-based strategy games allow the player a period for analysis before taking action, such as in games like *Civilization* and

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15. About the philosophy behind the various releases of the *Legend of Zelda* saga, cf. Cuddy (2008).

16. Regarding this videogame genre, see the article *Strategy video game* in *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategy_video_game> and the numerous bibliographic references listed under "References."

Heroes of Might and Magic, making them more like strategic table games, from which they have evolved. Real-time strategy games are not based on turns but on continuous action, with faster decisions, they are therefore more similar to what happens in the normal functioning of real military campaigns. It is no wonder that military action games, like the *Total War* saga, are usually designed in this format.[17]

Within the strategy games, one of the most popular subgenres is the building of empires, an offshoot from turn-based games, whose objective is the creation and maintenance of empires. Thus, aspects like the economy, diplomacy and research take on greater importance than military tactics. Here we find an abundance of historical games, based on real data from the civilizations they attempt to reproduce. In these games the player must adopt one of the opposing factions from the game, of which he will become the ruler, general or supreme leader. For this reason, the multiplayer system has had some of its best success in this genre. For example, in *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings*, set in the Middle Ages after the fall of the Roman Empire, the player can choose between 13 civilizations from that period of history. One can play against the machine, or against other players on line, up to a maximum of 8 players per match.

As we have noted, this is where the player leaves behind the solitary, individualistic hero role, and becomes the leader of large masses of humans, whose destiny is in his or her hands.

5.5 The particular case of role videogames and online multiplayer systems: Toward a new type of videogame hero?

Another scenario with regard to defining the figure of hero is found in *Role Playing Games* (RPG). Not only do plotlines take on great importance, but the player can design his or her own character – unlike traditional games where the character is defined by default (or the changes that the player can make are rather limited) – and any increase in powers is progressive, as one passes through different levels of the game and acquires new weapons and powers. Furthermore, while adventure videogames usually focus on a single character, role videogames usually work through a group of characters. These characters are defined by certain numeric attributes that are controlled through a statistical program.

17. Regarding this saga and especially *Rome: Total War*, cf. Ghita and Andrikopoulos (2009: 114–119).

As an example of all this, we point to *Final Fantasy VII*,[18] a role videogame considered to be among the best of all times. Its main character, a mercenary and ex-soldier, Cloud Strife, comes into the service of an eco-terrorist organization called Avalanche, with the objective of stopping the Shinra Corporation, who is draining the life from the planet in question in order to use it as a source of energy. In addition to this character, there are others that make up Avalanche, including Aerith Gainsborough, a female protagonist from the first part of the game, the only one who can use White Material; Tita Lockhard, female protagonist from the second part of the game, childhood friend of Cloud; Barret Wallace is the leader of Avalanche, and hates everything to do with Shinra, since they attacked his home town; Cid Highwind, from the Shinra Corporation, navigates the Highwind ship; and finally, Vincent Valentine, a character who had been subjected to all kind of cruel experiments and may transform himself into monstrous beings, modifying his body at will.

This multiplicity of characters, who can be adopted by a matching number of players, has allowed RPGs to become some of the videogames to make greatest use of the multiplayer system. The multiplayer system has undergone spectacular development in recent years, especially in its online modality over Internet, and has signified a real revolution in how electronic games are conceived, and in some of its modalities, also how the concept of hero is conceived.[19]

In contrast to the traditional game mode of a single player against the machine (console or computer), multiplayer systems allow the interaction of two or more players at the same time, whether physically present and connected to the same console with different controls, or over Internet or some other type of network (e.g. intranet), where a certain number of players (sometimes even a large number) are connected simultaneously. Multiplayer modes, as we have seen in strategy or empire-building videogames, can be based in real time or turn-based. More and more often we find games that were originally designed for a single player evolving toward the multiplayer system, and thus toward this kind of cooperative play. As examples we point to *Quake 3*, *Counter Strike*, *Soldier Front*, *World of Warcraft* and *Ragnarök Online*.

When this type of cooperative play is joined to an RPG, or role-playing game, the MMORPG modality results (Massively multiplayer online role-playing game), which allows many players (sometimes thousands) to simultaneously enter a virtual world over the Net and to interact among themselves. In order to do so, the player

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18. On the well-known saga *Final Fantasy*, cf. Calamosca (2003) and especially, Blahuta, Beaulieu and Irwin (2009).

19. Among the extensive bibliography available on this type of videogame and on online multiplayer systems, we would highlight the following fundamental studies: Barton (2008), Kelly (2004), King and Krzywinska (2006), Peterson (2012), Taylor (2006).

must first create a character, which he or she defines in all its details (race, profession, weapons, etc.), and introduces it into the game, where it increases in level and experience through Player vs. Player (PvP) fights, or Player vs. Environment (PvE) fights, or by carrying out different adventures or missions called quests.

MMORPG games are different from non-massive videogames in that the latter usually have a limited number of players, while MMORPG games allow any number of simultaneous players, with server bandwidth establishing the limit of how many persons may be connected at any time.

A good example of this kind of game is *Ragnarök Online*, a game from Korea, based on a Manga.[20] The game consists of creating a character that must develop by going up levels; this is accomplished through contact with other players in a virtual world.

Characters are defined by a series of attributes called their Stats (statistics), which are shown in the game – their physical strength, agility and speed, intelligence, etc. – as well as by a number of jobs that can be created in *Ragnarök,* divided into primary, secondary and tertiary classes. As an example, among the primary class jobs we find: novice, a basic unspecialized class; swordsman, specialized in use of the sword, but also with a wider variety of weapons available; mage, specialized in use of basic magic; thief, specialized in stealing and use of daggers.

The players, as they embody one of the many characters mentioned, are grouped to form guilds or clans, which join together to fight in the so-called *War of Emperium* or *WoE.* These clans share experiences and advance together in the game. They are recognized by wearing an emblem that distinguishes them from other clans, and being under the command of a guild master or leader.

In short, in this multiplayer system, the formerly known solitary, individualistic hero who is predominant in most traditional graphic adventures, takes on a more social, collaborative dimension.

5.6 On heroes and villains[21]

Another trait shared by the ancient tales of mythical heroes and videogames of today is a stark Manichaeism that divides characters into "good" and "bad", heroes and villains, in plots where there is practically no room for shades of gray. Even in Classical myth there are numerous character pairs formed by a hero and an illustrious rival,

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20. Cf. <http://www.playragnarok.com/gameguide/howtoplay.aspx>, <http://iro.ragnarokonline.com/>, <http://www.ragnarok-guide.com/>.

21. For an examination of the notions of hero and villain, as they are represented in today's media, cf. Alsford (2006). He concludes his interesting study with the following words (Alsford 2006: 124): "To a significant, albeit simplistic, extent the hero and the villain may be seen as aspects of often a monster: Achilles-Paris,[22] Aeneas-Turnus,[23] Heracles-Geryon, Theseus and the Minotaur, Ulysses and the cyclops Polyphemus, etc. This simply illustrates the same simple schema that symbolizes the confrontation between good and evil, light and darkness. Furthermore, in the mythic tale, the rival's bravery, power or cruelty were often emphasized in order to highlight as much as possible the grandeur and largeness of the hero's exploits.

One consequence of this Manichaeism, common to other genres like comics or peplum films that have so influenced videogames, is that the figure of hero is matched by a villain with a personality of its own. For great heroes, or better put, in order to even further exalt a hero's virtues, there is nothing better than confronting him with evil villains that are equipped with superpowers, often equal to or even greater than those of the hero himself.

In fact, just as there are rankings of the main videogame heroes, something similar is done with villains, as we saw at the beginning of this study. Of course, villains also can be put in some kind of order according to their degree of vileness and power. At the more "harmless" end we might include Bowser, the main enemy of Mario in the *Super Mario Bros* games. He is supposedly the leader of the Koopa race, and as such he has tried several times to take over the Mushroom Kingdom in the *Super Mario Bros* games. His most well-known "exploit" is kidnapping princess Peach, obliging Mario to act in order to rescue her. Bowser's intent is to thus attract his enemy and be able to kill him, something that never occurs. As the representation of brute force, he is also cruel, stubborn, distrusting, a liar, vengeful and heartless. He is always beaten by Mario, who makes use of intelligence and the elements found in the scenarios where they fight.

For his part, Dr. Robotnik, also known as Dr. Eggman, is the opponent and enemy of that most famous hedgehog of videogames, Sonic. Robotnik is a very intelligent scientist, master of robotics, and driven by a single idea, that of dominating the whole planet. Toward this end he will not hesitate to search the world for certain powerful gems, the Emeralds of Chaos, in order to strengthen his mechanical contrivances and weapons. In order to stop his megalomaniac plans, Sonic the hedgehog will defeat him using his skills, especially his speed, even though the untiring doctor makes use of forces and powers from the past, such as Perfect Chaos, Biolizard, Solaris, Dark Gaia and Time Eater, none of which will avail him.

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the same tragic character, one who encounters a crisis of some sort or another and chooses to respond in a particular way. It is in the nature of the response to circumstances *in extremis* that we see the heroic and villainous personas manifest themselves."

22. On the mythical characterization of these illustrious opponents and especially their presence in ancient literature and art, cf. Alvar and Blázquez (1997: 15–53).

23. On the characterization of heroes, see Palacios Martín (1979).

In the *Legend of Zelda* sage, Link's main opponent is Ganon, also known as Ganondorf, a great wizard with much physical strength and mystical power, in addition to cunning and courage. Sometimes called the Great Evil King or Lord of the Darkness, at times he possesses the Triforce of Power, making him practically immortal, because its power can cure almost any wound, except for those caused by the Master Sword and the Arrows of Light. His stated objective is to get the Triforce, that golden triangle that would allow the one who touches it to attain the True Force and to control all. However, as we seen in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, in order for this to happen, the person who touches it must maintain a balance between the three powers that make up the Triforce: Power, Wisdom and Courage. If the one who touches it especially desires one of its divine gifts, that person will possess their most desired gift within them, while the other two gifts will be granted to other individuals chosen by the goddesses Din, Nayru and Farore, creators of this exceptional triangle. For this reason, Ganondorf only controls the Triforce of Power, since when he touched the Triforce in this installment of the saga, power was what he most coveted. Finally, as a point of interest, in the *Twilight Princess* release, after Ganondorf is aided by another villain called Zant, who uses the Triforce of Power to free him from the prison where the seven sages of the Twilight Realm had shut him up, a final battle occurs between the villain and Link the hero, when Ganondorf is not only defeated but also killed when impaled by the Master Sword.[24]

As for *Final Fantasy VII*, the main evil character is Sephiroth, who is the result of Jenova Project S, led by Professor Hojo. The aim of this project was to use cells from an alien being found in the North Crater, believed to be a Cetra or Ancient, a bygone race with magical powers who once inhabited the world, in order to create human beings with the powers of this race of Ancients. Professor Hojo and his assistant Lucrecia injected cells from this alien being, named Jenova, into their own son when he was still a fetus. With time, Sephiroth became the most powerful warrior, becoming a Soldier First Class in the war of Shinra against the Wutai nation. His main weapon is a 7 1/2 foot-long katana, called the Masamune, which only he knows how to use.

Among the enemies of the superheroes, one of the most acclaimed is certainly the Joker, Batman's archenemy, who appears in almost all the Batman videogames, although normally as just another enemy among other great villains. For example, in *Batman: Dark Tomorrow*, he competes for vileness with Ra's al Ghul and Black Mask; and in *Lego Batman 2: DC Superheroes*, he makes an alliance with Lex Luthor to defeat the superheroes. However, in *Batman: Arkham Asylum,* the Joker is the main antagonist. Unlike other enemies of the superheroes, the Joker possesses no superpower, other than an innate genius that enables him to create a wide variety of artefacts that help him meet his objectives. One of these is "laughing gas", which

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24. Regarding this character, cf. the *Wikipedia* article <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganon>.

actually does not create laughter so much as anaphylactic shock; depending on the dose, one's skin and hair may turn green. Other Joker weapons include a flower that he wears in his suit, a pistol and the "wild cards," steel blades that he hides in his sleeve; when thrown they can seriously wound his opponents. Without a doubt, the most iconic aspect of this character is his exaggerated smile, which, according to some, is caused by the "laughing gas" mentioned above, although in a more realistic version it is usually explained as a scar made with a knife.[25]

Although fewer in number, there are also female villains in this universe of evil. We would point to Sarah Kerrigan, also known as the Queen of Blades, the main antagonist in the universe of StarCraft, a complex story of interplanetary conflicts between three races with differing abilities and technology: the Terrans, the Zerg and the Protoss.[26]

Originally, she is a young woman with a psychic ability, able to use telepathy and telekinesis. She was recruited by the Confederation to undergo the Ghost training program, which prepared specialists to work in undercover operations. As a young child, due to her psychic ability, she accidentally killed her mother and left her father with brain damage, causing deep trauma to herself. With time she became the right-hand force of Arcturus Mengsk, leader of the sons of Korhal, the Confederation's enemy group. Later on, captured by the Zerg Supermind, she became the leader of these beings, the Zerg, who were sensitive and obeyed orders conveyed telepathically. With them, after defeating all their enemies in a great battle, she controls the planet Char, awaiting future perils to come.[27]

But not all villains are human beings, more than one has the appearance of a sophisticated computer that controls everything and employs its artificial intelligence for evil. One of the most paradigmatic cases is GLaDOS (*Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System*), an intelligent computerized system that is the main antagonist in *Portal* and in the first part of its sequel, *Portal 2.* Its original purpose was the control and maintenance of the Aperture Science research center. At first it is a simple voice that guides and helps the player, at least apparently, until its words and actions become more and more malicious and its intentions clearer, going so far as to use a neurotoxin to kill laboratory scientists before the events that are recreated in *Portal.* At the end of the first release of the series, it is destroyed by a character called Chell, although this death is only apparent.[28]

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25. Cf. the corresponding *Wikipedia* article <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joker_%28comics%29 >.

26. Regarding *StarCraft*, cf. Pérez Latorre (2012b).

27. Cf. the *Wikipedia* article <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarah_Kerrigan>.

28. Cf. the *Wikipedia* article regarding the videogame *Portal* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal_%28video_game%29>.

5.7 The figure of anti-hero

Along with heroes and villains, the videogame world, like the worlds of literature[29] and cinema,[30] has often exploited the figure of anti-hero, a character who is initially evil,[31] with all the traits to be classified as just another villain, but due to the circumstances, decides to make a radical life change, becoming in the end a genuine hero.[32]

The character Kratos, who we have been treating so far as a hero, undoubtedly belongs to this category: recall that at the start of his "life" he was evil and bloodthirsty, at the service of the god Ares, and that in an act of chance he did away with the life of his wife and daughter.

Another game featuring anti-heroes is *The Last of Us*, from the *survival horror* and *action-adventure* genres, a 2013 release for the PS3, which takes place in a world dominated by creatures infected by the *Cordyceps unilateralis* fungus, leading them to have predatory behavior toward noninfected humans – reminding us of typical zombie behavior. Joel, who had lost his daughter Sarah twenty years before in a soldier attack, and who together with his partner Tess makes a living in contraband in a quarantined zone of Boston, must transport a young girl, Ellie, and deliver her to the Fireflies, a rebel group located on the outskirts of the quarantine area. Ellie is an exceptional child; in spite of having been affected by the fungus, her body was able to develop a kind of immunization, making her the only hope for possibly obtaining an antidote to counteract the monstruous epidemic. Knowing this, Joel will avoid delivering the young girl to the rebel group, whose leader Marlene wants to her to be sacrificed in order to analyze her brain and obtain a vaccine against the infection. Clearly, the protagonist's action is strongly influenced by his desire to never again lose a defenseless person who is under his charge.[33]

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29. Cf. Brombert (1999), Casariego (2000), Garnier (2002), Simmons (2008), Gurung (2010).

30. Cf. Trice and Holland (2001), Gil Ruiz (2014), Pérez Rufi (2014).

31. Alternatively, the initial hero may end up becoming evil, as with Anakin Sky Walker, who becomes Darth Vader in *Star Wars*.

32. Regarding this figure, see the French *Wikipedia* article "Antihéros" <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antih%C3%A9ros>, which includes a complete listing of the antiheroes of literature, cinema, television, comics, and, of course, videogames.

33. For more informaiton on this videogame, see the French *Wikipedia* article, <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_of_Us>.

5.8 The hero or superhero as surety for the established order

Finally, we wish to close our characterization of the videogame here by noting a trait that is shared with the Classical hero and the heroes and superheroes of comics: the fact that the ultimate message conveyed by these heroes is in no way revolutionary. The experience is basically an individual one:

> … one of the main conceptions conveyed by the videogame epic is that of reaffirming the player in the eternal present of consumerism wherein he or she dwells, removing from their horizon the idea of social change as a collective project for the future – the future being presented as an eminently individual journey
> (Sánchez Parrón 2014: 30)

This is related to the ideological underpinnings of many videogames, essentially a defense of the capitalistic system, of which the videogame industry is one of its finest manifestations. If we think of a game like the *Sims,* or its forerunner *Sim City,* we find that capitalism is in fact the only possible way to play, leading some experts to consider it not so much a social simulation game as a simulation of consumer society (cf. Pérez Latorre 2012a: 72).

In fact, in the case of the Classical hero, whether the great pre-Trojan heroes or the heroes of the Trojan conflict, their struggle is not to change the world and end injustice (an injustice which the gods themselves are largely responsible for, because of their own actions). These heroes strive to destroy creatures that threaten the world order as governed by the Olympic gods – such as when Heracles or Theseus wipe out all kind of monsters[34] and bandits – or they fight against the nation's enemies, as in the case of Troy, a simple dispute over hegemony, in which the gods also take their stand. In other words, to a certain extent they are defenders of the *status quo.*

In the case of superheroes, in spite of being equipped with superpowers that would allow them to take over the government, destroy an army and even alter the planetary equilibrium, they are deeply conservative. These characters are profoundly good, moral and subordinate to natural and civil laws. They limit their action to a small location on the planet (in Superman's case, Smallville in his youth, Metropolis as an adult; in Batman's case, Gotham), and their enemies are often common criminals dedicated to robbing banks, so that these superheroes become iconic defenders of private property. They defend the Manichaean principle according to which all authority is good and uncorrupted and every evil character is evil

34. In effect, the stereotypical hero-against-dragon fight has this meaning of preserving the world order, given that this mythical animal is a symbol of chaos (cf. De Vries 1963: 215).

to the core, with no hope for redemption (Eco 1975: 291–292). Eco also adds, in this regard, that Superman is moreover the perfect example of civic consciousness in complete isolation from political consciousness, so that he will never represent any danger to the powers that be.

6. Conclusions

By way of conclusion, we may say that videogames offer a complete remodel and update of the figure and role of the Classical hero, which, without losing its most characteristic features, adapts to the demands of such a unique media as the videogame adventure or narration.

To begin, the role of hero is adopted by the player, who holds in his or her hands the destiny of the virtual character that he embodies on the screen; the player's skill and experience will determine whether the virtual protagonist will reach the glory that is their due, or whether the hero perishes as the victim of the human operator's inexperience or ineptitude. This implies that, in essence, the videogame adventure is an individual experience, although online multiplayer varieties are taking on a social and collaborative aspect that was absent in more traditional graphic adventures. Especially in MMORPG type games, all participants compete among themselves in conditions of equality, instead of the traditional man-against-machine confrontation.

In addition, the videogame hero is a character in the making, at the hands of the player. While the virtual life of these characters is roughly marked out by the game rules governing the fictional world where they are brought to life, by no means is their success in meeting their goals guaranteed. Everything will depend, as we have said, on the actions of the human operator.

If we examine the universe of these created beings, there is such variety and multiplicity that it is difficult to reduce these creatures to certain minimal common traits that would characterize all of them. What seems clear is that the videogame has encouraged the development of a type of hero, as have other manifestations of popular culture, where his or her status is attained not by birth or by possessing certain exceptional abilities, but by the effort and determination of normal individuals. Their drive for greatness has enabled them to acquire more and more power in the game and so reach the final victory and glory. These characters are therefore heroes in that they were able to perform an extraordinary feat (not necessarily military), one worthy of admiration and imitation, because they had to make a titanic effort, or, in a military context, valiantly risk their life.

However, this message of voluntarism and overcoming opposition should not lead us to overlook that these creatures are clothed in ideological wraps that are nothing more than the consumer society we live in, and whose values are represented by these characters. Thus, these heroes are a product of the culture, committed to maintaining the *status quo* of current society, since the titanic struggle and the superhuman exploits that the player accomplishes through his or her avatar begin and end in the narrow framework of the screen, where the avatar comes alive, completely oblivious to the routine of everyday life.

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Horrible deaths, grotesque deaths

Inversion of the heroic model and construction of the reader-viewer

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The aim of this essay is to analyze several instances of the reversal of the hero's glorious death, the critical moment of his/her career. In order to achieve this goal, I have selected some of most outstanding passages from Lucan's *Civil War*, for instance Sceva's *aristeia* (6.138–262), and the episode of the Asbyte's death by the flavian epicist Silius Italicus (*Punica* 2.189–210).

After having studied the resources employed by the Roman writers, I compare them with the means of description of the grotesque deaths in the TV series *Spartacus* (2010–2013), a product of mass culture alien to the academic world. Both the similarities and the differences raised by this comparison are relevant to understanding the meaning of this kind of representation.

Keywords: hero, death, grotesque, Roman epic, Lucan, Silius Italicus, reception, TV series, Spartacus

1.

Reception Studies of the Classical world have often excluded representative productions from popular culture. However, the way these productions construct the image of Antiquity is not to be underestimated; on the contrary, this should be carefully observed, since they are largely responsible for current society's representation of ancient Greece and Rome.[1] For this reason, the present article seeks to explore the relationship between the way death is presented in a recent TV series, *Spartacus*

1. Cf. M. Malamud (2001: 209). Equally interesting is the work published by Hardwick-Harrison (2013). Winkler (2009), for his part, emphasizes the relationship between philology and the study of cinema. We consider Winkler's ideas also applicable to less substantial productions.

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(2010–2013)[2] and the work of the epic poets Lucan and Silius Italicus, convinced that points of connection can be found in the way that violence is represented. We do not pretend to establish an analogical comparison between these works, but to inquire into possible similarities in the use of certain resources in two types of text, both narrative texts yet very distant from each other in era as well as in genre and target audience. We begin with the notion that there is no dependency relationship between the Classical texts mentioned and the TV series, since we find nothing to suggest this.

There are two points that have led us to the study of our proposed topic. First, the television series is set in the Roman city of Capua, which facilitates the comparison, and establishes several points of connection with the texts of the Roman poets. Second, common to both creations is a close-up representation of violence, of extreme violence presented with precision and detail. Epic poetry is a genre that features war violence, death and bloodshed; furthermore, these are the unavoidable means by which the epic hero may attain the glory that he seeks. We observe this to be so from the earliest times, finding examples in Homer, Virgil and Ovid.[3] But this characteristic of the genre reaches unprecedented extremes in the poetry of Lucan, and maintains a significant presence in the work of the Flavian epicists. As for the TV series, the presence of extremely violent scenes is a characteristic feature and has been repeatedly called out by the critics (Simmons 2011: 139). In this regard the words of critic R. Lloyd are sufficient example (*Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2010):

> In titling its new series "Spartacus: Blood and Sand," the Starz Network cannot be accused of false advertising. There is blood, and lots of it – buckets of it, waves of it, seas of digitally enhanced candy-apple-red comic-book gore, spilling, spurting, hurtling across and toward the screen as bodies are stabbed, slashed, sledgehammered and variously dismembered. There is sand too, but you don't notice that so much.

These initial, easily appreciated similarities are followed by others, more profound in nature. The first of these is the importance given to representing the "show" within the show. While both TV series and cinema productions belong to show business, this is not such a defining trait for literary works. Nonetheless, literature has found its own way to create a more visible "show" by using descriptive techniques such as *enargeia,* which seeks to make the reader present in the acts that are

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2. American TV series from Starz network, written and directed by Steven S. DeKnight, starring Andy Whitfield (first season) and Liam McIntyre in the role of Spartacus. Its four seasons were: *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010), *Gods of the Arena* (2011), *Vengeance* (2012) and *War of the Damned* (2013), cf. Augoustakis & Cyrino (2017:6-8).

3. On this matter, we refer the reader to the summary and analysis by Mazzocchini (2000: 377–382).

being narrated. One especially interesting technique is the introduction of internal spectators within the narrative text; part of their function may be to place lively descriptions of the events before our eyes and to emphasize their show-like nature.[4] This aspect, shared by the epic and by historiography, is especially developed in the work of Lucan, and moreover, in a specific direction.[5] Beginning with a customary feature of the epic, the description of sporting games that are celebrated in memoriam of fallen heroes, Lucan goes further and substitutes these spectacles with different war conflicts, as if it were no longer a matter of a sporting event, but of gladiator contests. This is ratified by the presence of elements referring to looking, seeing and the protagonists' desire to be seen in their different exploits (Eldred 2002: 65–67). Descriptive features of the battle of Massilia were thus presented, as well as Vulteius's fight as a *naumachia*, Scaeva's as a gladiator's performance, and the fight with snakes as a *uenatio*.[6] Furthermore, Spartacus's activity as a gladiator, the topic chosen by the series in its first season, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, and in its prequel *Gods of the Arena*, inevitably requires and gives rise to the constant inclusion of the "show within the show", and even more so if we consider how this part is extended in comparison to earlier versions of this legend of the slave who rebelled against Rome in 73 BC.[7]

On the other hand, aside from the enormous distance in time, the theatralization of public life in the age of Nero (Edwards 1994: 83–97) and the show business culture that dominates our own society are not so far apart. The defining characteristics are, according to Vargas Llosa (2010: 27–59): the prevalence of image and sound over the spoken word, the purpose of entertainment at any cost, massification and frivolity, and the ability to deaden the audience's sensitivities and intellect. This cultural context is where we find the *Spartacus* series fitting in perfectly.

In the case of TV series, as in cinema overall, the effect of realism is achieved through different technical means, and particularly through special effects that "construct illusions that seek to collapse the frame that separates spectator from

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4. The presence of numerous indications or copies from the creator himself, the constant display of literary devices, the extreme nature of the content. The metaliterary readings of Lucan are numerous, perhaps exaggerated at times, but generally justified. This tendency is reflected even further in the Flavian writers.

5. Cf. Borzsák (1973), Leigh (1997), Feldherr (1995 and 1998), König (2005), Lovatt (2005), Bartolomé (2013).

6. The title of Ahl's chapter (1976: 84–114) "sangre y arena" is quite indicative of our affirmation; also Leigh's (1995: 235) references to Scaeva as Caesar's gladiator.

7. An interesting review and analysis of the cinematography on the figure of Spartacus from the perspective of the genre, not addressed here, may be found in Späth and Tröhler (2013: 41–64); equally useful is Chapter 5 of the work by Paul (2013).

spectacle. The neo-baroque shares a baroque delight in spectacle and sensory experiences" (Ndalianis 2004: 3, Sontag 1987: 275–292).

The common point in both cases is artificiality and reflexiveness. Lucan's text is quite aware of itself and constantly presents an accentuated awareness of poetic creation;[8] the prevailing aesthetic of the work is likewise a clear reflection and demonstration of such artificiality (Simmons 2011: 138).

This type of representation, because of its extreme content, and even more because of the technique employed, demands a viewer response more urgently. Analysis of the many possibilities of response lead the scholar to construct a complex, varied model of the reader-viewer, but that cannot be left undefined.[9]

2.

For the proposed comparative study, we have chosen the culminating moment within the hero's career, the moment of death (Miller 2000). In Antiquity, as well as in more current appearances, a glorious death is equivalent to a death in combat. From its beginnings, the epic repeats time and again this desire for a glorious death which will immortalize the hero forever. However, alongside these glorious deaths reported by epic literature in different languages through the ages, other works appear which we might label as ridiculous or even grotesque. Our choice is prompted by several aspects, especially because of the many possibilities offered by its complexity and because this moment within the hero's career has been less often addressed and represented.

The way that different authors and media deal with this question will be the topic of this study. We will outline the main lines of research and analyze what we consider to be the most illustrative examples within the post-Classical Latin epic, as well as in the cited TV series.

There are a wide range of possibilities for presenting death scenes, some of which might certainly be labeled as in the title of this study. First, we find the least controversial, simpler type, both in terms of its function and its interpretation. These are the ridiculous deaths that occur as the result of a cowardly act. Mockery and humor are clear and essential elements in these cases.[10] It is more complicated

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8. The increasingly plentiful interpretation of the work in meta-literary fashion, as well as its characteristic intertextual density, are good proof of this.

9. We agree with Reed's statement (2007: 24): "In discussing the thematics of these passages we are in effect construing, even more than the death or dying figure, a viewer".

10. We find a good example in Silius, *Pun.* 7.500ff., where he describes the end of the cowards that flee and hide in a tree; cf. also *Pun.* 7.661–679.

to determine a scene's status as horrible or grotesque, as well as its meaning within a given context. Ridiculous deaths are increasingly frequent within the epic genre in descriptions of death scenes, whether glorious or not; they are a way of manifesting the brutal reality of war. Horrible and grotesque deaths, with their complex definition and meaning, give rise to complicated reception of this type of scene, and even more so when there is such a great distance between the moment of production and the moment of reception. There is a clear risk in this type of representation, since the death portrayed may easily slip from one category to the other.

The inclusion of grotesque and even ridiculous deaths within the epic genre is not an innovation of the post-Classical era. As early as Homer, we find examples of this type (Kebriones, Hector's charioteer, *Il.*16.740–4), and even more in Virgil, who goes further than his Greek predecessor in the extent of macabre details.[11] Despite this, it is clear that the epic poet who takes this to its ultimate expression, while including elements already present in the Archaic authors, is Lucan. The Flavian epicists will follow him to a great extent, and while not reaching such extremes, they make use of many of the Cordoban poet's devices in order to express horror and macabre details.[12]

3.

Without going into a thorough analysis of the term grotesque, we wish to indicate its meaning as used in this study. According to definitions from Thomson (1972) and Kayser (1981), we understand grotesque to mean a mixture of incompatible elements, of horror and comedy, of fantasy and reality, of order and disorder, the sum of the ridiculous, excessive and macabre. Similarly, associated with the grotesque is a conscious satisfaction with spectacle and paradox (Bartsch 1997: 36–37, based on McNeil 1990: 171). Its presence provokes dissimilar reactions, making reception of the grotesque moment problematic (Kayser 1981: 181). Application of the term grotesque to a work or passage presents difficulties in that a considerable degree of subjectivity is involved. The limits of the grotesque, understood as stated above, are not easy to mark out, and its interpretation can easily slip into bordering territory,

11. Cf. Mazzochini (2000: 56 and 337–355). There is no doubt that in the death of Rhamnes at the hands of Nisus (*Aen.* 9.324–328), the grotesque and macabre are highly featured.

12. Given the content of the work and the techniques used, it is not surprising to find comparisons between Lucan and specific modern authors or contemporary artistic trends and genres: in addition to the Baroque, also neo-Gothic poetry (Castagna 2002), horror films and literature (Badalì 2008, Hömke 2010), comics (Johnson 1987: 57), the work of Goya (Johnson 1987: 85; Bartolomé 2010: 111–139).

such as the ridiculous or the caricature, given that the grotesque shares certain features with all of these. S. Bartsch (1997: 36–37) summarizes the components of the grotesque as follows:

> A fusion of incompatible elements: a mixture of horror and comedy, fantasy and reality, order and disorder; a loss of identity, a distortion of natural size and shape, a fragmentation of order: this is the grotesque … The body's fate in this genre is worse than mere loss of life: the human torso is the object of acts of unusual cruelty, presented to the reader in detail that is both startlingly vivid and artificially artistic, that focuses on everything that is extravagant and exaggerated, abnormal and novel (Thomson 1972: 8) … Finally, the grotesque is experienced in the act of reception. Reading this kind of narrative 'awakens openly contradictory perceptions – laughter over deformation, disgust over the gruesome, surprise over the boldness of the impossible creations' (C. M. Wieland, quoted in Barash, 1971: 148 [F. K Barasch *The Grotesque. A Study in Meanings*, The Hague 1971])

Intentional exaggeration and self-acknowledged spectacle are artistic methods, considered "baroque," and characteristic of the so-called camp aesthetic.[13] According to the study by Sontag (1987: 280): "To perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater." On this point, we are able to find connections between the texts of Lucan and the more modern productions that we analyze. In the age of Nero and his successors, a theatralization of public life occurs, something which is equally observable in the literary work of the era. This will be analyzed in greater detail.

We must now ask ourselves about the meaning of including these extremely violent scenes and the details of death and fighting, of such interest to Lucan and the Flavian poets. The simplest, most customary answer points to two circumstances: first, the tastes of the day, which gave free rein to expressing these details (unlike the moderation of the Classical period),[14] and second, the celebration of gladiator games, where violence and death were offered as entertainment.[15] However, we believe that there are more satisfactory explanations from the literary and ideological point of view. The presence of so many horrible images in the work of Lucan not only reflects a standard feature of the tastes of the day, but also serves as an expressive instrument that fulfills a coherent poetic function, as Micozzi (1999: 372)

13. Ndalianis (2004:*passim*) points to exaggeration and spectacle as characteristics of the "neo-baroque" aesthetic, concurring on this point with the "camp" aesthetic (Sontag 1987: 275–292) .

14. Hömke (2010: 92–93) summarizes the debate on this passage of Lucan.

15. On the meaning of the games for the Romans, and the diverse opinions in this regard, the reference from Leigh (1997: 282–291) is quite useful.

indicates. The very virulence and complicated brutality of certain images becomes an essential artifice for the full expression of the anguish that runs throughout the poem. This Italian scholar (1999: 383) concludes that the post-Virgil epic may emerge from a different sensibility, consisting of a new form of understanding and representing, using new language that is more suitable for the representation of anguish. The revival of heroic values in works like the *Punica* of Silius does not exclude the presence of perturbing elements.

One reason given for the widespread use of violent deaths in modern-day productions, whether on the big screen or small screen, is the fascination they produce, especially when the action takes place in distant times (as in the Classical world). The presence of violence in our current societies is another reason offered (Winkler 2005: 88–89). The exhibition of technical effects that offer extraordinary "realism" often becomes the main objective, even more than the content itself. In the specific case of the *Spartacus* series, there is an important qualifier in the use of grotesque deaths. While all the deaths are shown in detail, even their most horrible aspects, deaths on the Roman side are treated quite differently from the gladiator deaths, with the most humiliating aspects reserved for the Roman group, as is manifest in the reactions of the spectator audience.

4.

Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile* often crosses the limit of what Classical taste permitted, adopting the characteristic of representing violence in a single way: violence as intolerable,[16] often represented through grotesque features. Unlike the rest of epic literature – where the presence of the macabre in armed conflict is only one expressive possibility, not often used – in the *Bellum Ciuile*, the macabre is *the* expressive choice, variants or alternatives are not allowed. This is the choice of a text that is describing an event in and of itself monstrous and hideous (Estèves 2006: 29). The extended scenes of violence and atrocities correspond to this determination on the part of the poet (Luc. 2.64–233, 4.529–81, 746–87; 6.118–262, 7.786–846). Reality is represented by revealing the most brutal aspects, because the struggles that are described leave no room for traditional heroism, only distorted images. The traditional epic most genuinely expresses the heroic exploit as the *aristeia* or individual action by which the hero obtains glory and causes multiple casualties in the enemy ranks; but in Lucan's work, there is no room for conventional *aristeiai*.

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16. In the words of Bartsch (1997: 12): "The vicissitudes [of the human body] exert a compelling fascination on the first-century A. D. poet Lucan, whose epic, the *Civil War,* is violent to a degree shared but not rivaled by other Roman writers in his time".

This is observed in the account of the battle of Massilia (Luc. 3.4), where a series of war actions are described, apparently reproducing the conventional schemata of the epic poem, but at a deeper level these models are radically transformed. This account, though it is the only one in the entire *Bellum Civile* to maintain the conventional schema of naming some of the combatants, even here it does not follow convention: it only gives the name of the victim on one occasion (Gorman 2000: 271ff.); the eight names selected do not belong to any historically known persons.[17] The only example in this account and in the entire work where both contestants are named (Tyrrhenus and Argus), likewise reveals the same manipulation of the epic tradition (Luc. 3.716–21):

> *'uos', ait 'o socii, sicut tormenta soletis,*
> *me quoque mittendis rectum conponite telis.*
> *Egere* quod superest animae, *Tyrrhene, per omnis*
> *bellorum casus. Ingentem militis usum*
> *hoc habet ex magna defunctum parte cadauer:*
> *uiuentis feriere loco.'*

> He said: 'O comrades, just as you do with the engines,
> me too you must position straight to shoot my weapons.
> Tyrrhenus, spend what remains of life in all
> the hazards of war. This your corpse already
> largely dead has the heroic value of a soldier:
> it will be struck in place of a living man.'

Tyrrhenus is compared to a war machine, nearly a cadaver, the attacking part in an inanimate object.[18]

In the account of this battle, Lucan presents death as an unusual type of spectacle: *uarii miracula fati*, Luc. 3.634 (Metger 1970: 438 = 1957: 63); he describes the wounds in detail, but gives little attention to the victim's mental suffering (Most 1992: 400).[19] He seems to invite the reader to read or contemplate from this same

17. Hunink (1992: 231) notes, regarding the mutilations described in Luc. 3.609ff.: "Lucan has fused all of these elements, bringing the injuries to a new extreme (cf. e.g. on 612) and creating a new paradox: with every injury, the warrior gets more eager to fight, right up to his final moment (cf. on 614). Rather than a description of brave and heroic fighting, this has become a paradoxical scene of mutilation and death, a *miraculum fati* (634)".

18. More extravagant is the suicide of Argus's father (Luc. 3.723–751), seeming to suggest a comic dimension, in a humor of bitterness: the father sees his son dying, and uses two different methods to commit suicide so that Argus would not die before he does.

19. Bartsch (1997: 12) expresses something similar in relation to Lucan's usual practice: "Oddly, the gruesome mutilations and truncations documented above seem to have little effect on those who sustain them; the pain and fear of the victim are completely elided, as if inexistent, while perspective, surprised and entertained, by presenting only the surface of the *dirum … letum*, on occasion even ridiculing the schemata passed down to him. As Alexis (2011: 199) indicates:

> In Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, the traditional glorious chest wound is rendered ridiculous as his poem tells of two spears pushed out of the body by blood, *BC* 3.590, and when a quivering javelin stuck in the breast of Telo, *BC* 3.598, his dying hand turned his ship away from the enemy.

We now turn to the episode of the *aristeia* of Scaeva, the Caesarian centurion featured in one of the most striking scenes of the work, in his fight against the Pompeian army in Dyrrhaquium – a fight that goes beyond the limits of credibility.[20] One of the most striking and most studied episodes in Lucan's work, it can also be looked on as a very problematic text.[21] This poet from Cordoba uses the schema of the traditional epic *aristeia* in such a way as to radically transform it, without going so far as a parody. While form perfectly matches the model, substance is quite opposite to it, and the contradiction gives birth to a monstrosity (Hömke 2010: 103). We become witnesses to all this, as perplexed spectators, at the invitation or demand of the text itself.

According to Leigh (1997: 243), the meta-literary reference to the amphitheater plays a disturbing role. On one hand, it subverts the conventions of *pathos* by referring the reader to emotions felt at the amphitheater; on the other hand, it undermines the exemplary quality, allowing or encouraging the reader to treat the episode simply as a show. From the very beginning of the account, Scaeva manifests his desire to be watched, and his comrades become spectators from the start of the contest (*mirantesque uirum atque auidi spectare secuntur / scituri iuuenes, numero deprensa locoque / an plus quam mortem uirtus daret,* astonished at the warrior and keen to watch, the soldiers / follow to discover whether valour caught by numbers and position / could achieve something more than death, Luc. 6.167–169).[22] Throughout the text, his comrades' sight and senses are substituted with the descriptive precision that introduces the external spectator into the contest till the very end, with no mediation or only with remarks drawn from the initial sentence

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the victim's body soldiers on impervious to its fragmentary status. For the reader, this has the effect of rendering the body a mere tool for battle; the subjectivity of the victim *qua* victim never enters into play".

20. Despite being a historical person, mentioned by Caesar (*BC* 3.53), and converted into a model by historians like Valerius Maximus (3.223) and Plutarch (*Caesar* 16).

21. Conte (1981 = 1971), Ahl (1976), Johnson (1985), Henderson (1998 = 1987), Bartsch (1997), Leigh (1997), Hömke (2010).

22. Translations of the *Bellum Ciuile* are taken from Braund 1992.

or expressions like *Fortuna uidet* (Luc. 6.192), the narrator's intervention (Luc. 6.196–201), similes typical of circus acts (comparisons to a leopard: Luc. 6.180–3, a Libyan elephant: Luc. 6.208–213, a Pannonian she-bear: Luc. 6.220–223), the cries of the victors (Luc. 6.226–227), *a uoltu uirtute penitus remota* (Luc. 6.229) and the final apostrophe (Luc. 6.249–250).

Even if Lucan follows the schema of the *aristeia,* he does not keep to the epic tradition, but distances himself from the kind of heroes found in Homer and Virgil by means of multiple disqualifying elements. Changes are made right from the start. Scaeva is not of noble origin, his opponents, except for Aulus, are unnamed. The *adhortatio* appeals to negative emotions such as anger. The author's comments deny the value of *uirtus* in a civil war (Luc. 6.145–146). The very recognition of the protagonist as a negative model ('*Sit Scaeva relicti / Caesaris exemplum potius quam mortis honestae*' Luc. 6.234–235) subverts the essence of the *aristeia* and its exemplary quality.[23]

The technique used invites the reader to the spectacle, but the narrator manipulates him through different devices. If we continue with the cinema metaphor, the narrator (camera) establishes several changing focal points: the main character (also the only one who is given a voice), the different victims and even the narrator himself, as Hömke (2010: 101) points out. There is an alternation between the center of the action, on one hand, and the audience, on the other, and, within the action itself, between an outside and an inside view. Scaeva's view is especially interesting when the poet describes the ringing sound of the shield and the pain of his temples inside the helmet (Luc. 6.192–194). Also introduced is a manifestation of sympathy toward the defeated (*infelix Aulus*). But in general, emotions are not expressed until the end, such as the rejoicing of the Pompey's men at the fall of Scaeva, or the veneration with which he is taken up by the Caesareans. The zoom technique, moving from the specific, minimal detail to the overall scene, customary in horror and catastrophe movies, helps to make a greater impression on the reader, but at the same time, creates emotional distance from what is narrated. This is part of what Hömke calls "aesthetisizing the horrific," and one of its most notable applications is in describing the process of dying (2010: 98–99).

The beginning tells of the enemy massacre caused by Scaeva, listing a variety of deaths, each one crueler than the one before, but all of them given in detail (Luc. 6.169–179):

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23. Gorman (2000: 278) makes the following assessment: "This episode is actually an epic remembrance of a historical story in which Scaeva's shield was pierced by 120 weapons, but Lucan has taken that story – as unlikely at it may be in itself – and transformed it into the absurd. His Scaeva quickly abandons his shield, and those myriad weapons strike his body and stick in his bones and vitals (6.195, 205, etc.). Thus, in this *aristeia* Lucan is not glorifying Caesarean valor, but mocking it with hyperbolic irony". Also see the commentary by Henderson (1998: 171–176).

ille ruenti
aggere consistit, primumque cadauera plenis
turribus euoluit subeuntisque obruit hostis
corporibus, totaeque uiro dant tela ruinae,
roboraque et moles hosti seque ipse minatur.
nunc sude nunc duro contraria pectora conto
detrudit muris, et ualli summa tenentis
amputat ense manus; caput obterit ossaque saxo
ac male defensum fragili conpage cerebrum
dissipat; alterius flamma crinesque genasque
succendit, strident oculis ardentibus ignes.

On the tumbling ramp
he takes his stand and first rolled out the corpses from the towers
full of them and, as the enemy approached, he buried them
with bodies; and all the ruined mass provided the warrior with weapons:
with timbers, boulders, with himself, he menaces the enemy.
Now with stakes and now with hardened poles he thrusts back
from the walls opposing breasts; with his sword he chops off hands
which grab the rampart's top; with a rock he crushes head
and bones and scatters brains protected ill by flimsy
skull; another's hair and cheeks he sets
aflame; the fire hiss as the eyes burn.

Also given in detail are the blows and wounds that he takes from his enemies, thus demonstrating his resistance beyond what is believable (Luc. 6.202–13):

iam pectora non tegit armis,
ac ueritus credi clipeo laeuaque uacasse
aut culpa uixisse sua[24] *tot uolnera belli*
solus obit densamque ferens in pectore siluam[25]
iam gradibus fessis, in quem cadat, eligit hostem [...]
tot facta sagittis,
tot iaculis unam non explent uolnera mortem

24. According to Conte (1981:ad loc.), the literary conscience of Lucan plays with the character's introspection in order to provide a (pseudo-)objective motivation, in line with the criteria of reality, for the absolute unreality of his narration. Leigh (1997: 245) considers it to be an allusion to the practice of gladiators.

25. As Alexis (2011: 193) says: "This bizarre image stretches the 'one against many' scene found in Homeric epic. Here one hero is wounded by so many spears that no more spears or arrows can make their way through to his vital organs, he is 'bearing in his breast a dense forest' (*densamque ferens in pectore siluam*, *BC* 6.205). Lucan parodies Virgil's image of a forest of Mezentius' spears fixed in Aeneas' shield (*ter secum Troius heros / immanem aerato circumfert tegmine siluam*, *Aen.* 10.886–87)".

He no longer protects his breast with weapons,
in fear the men will think his shield and left hand idle
or blame him for surviving, and all the many wound of war
he meets alone and, bearing in his breast a dense forest,
with steps now weary, he selects an enemy on whom to fall.[…]
wounds inflicted
by so many arrows, so many javelins, do not achieve a single death.

Next, struck in one eye by an arrow whose trajectory is described slowly, he plucks out the eye and steps on it (Luc. 6.214–227):

Dictaea procul, ecce, manu Gortynis harundo
tenditur in Scaeuam, quae uoto certior omni
in caput atque oculi laeuom descendit in orbem.
ille moras ferri neruorum et uincula rumpit
adfixam uellens oculo pendente sagittam
intrepidus, telumque suo cum lumine calcat. […]
perdiderat uoltum rabies, stetit imbre cruento
informis facies.[26] laetus fragor *aethera pulsat*
uictorum: maiora uiris e sanguine *paruo*
gaudia *non faceret conspectum in Caesare uolnus.*

From far away – look¡ – a Gortynian shaft is aimed
by Dictaean hand at Scaeva: sent more surely than any prayer
could hope, it falls upon his head and enters his left eyeball.
He breaks the weapon's obstacle and muscles' ligaments,
boldly tearing out the arrow clinging with the eyeball
dangling, and tramples on the weapon together with his own eye.
[…]
His frenzy had destroyed his features, his disfigured face was stiff
with a bloody stream. The victors' happy clamour strikes
the skies: the warriors would not have more rejoiced
at a little blood had they seen a wound on Caesar.

Afterward, he pretends to be out of strength and kills the unsuspecting Aulus, only to carry on the fight full of vigor, until he falls riddled by the spears of his enemies. His people take him up and worship him like a god (Luc. 6.228–242 and 251–54):

26. Here the descriptive intention, between the horrible and the grotesque, focuses completely on the wounded centurion's face, which loses physical features and its identity.

ille tegens alta suppressum mente furorem,
mitis et a uoltu penitus uirtute remota,
'parcite', ait 'ciues; procul hinc auertite ferrum.
conlatura meae nil sunt iam uolnera morti:
non eget ingestis sed uolsis pectore telis.
tollite et in Magni uiuentem ponite castris.
hoc uestro praestate duci: sit Scaeua relicti
Caesaris exemplum potius quam mortis honestae.[27]
credidit infelix *simulatis uocibus* Aulus
nec uidit recto gladium mucrone tenentem,
membraque captiui pariter laturus et arma
fulmineum mediis excepit faucibus ensem.
incaluit uirtus, atque una caede refectus
'soluat' ait 'poenas, Scaeuam quicumque subactum
Sperauit'. […]
labentem turba suorum
excipit atque umeris defectum inponere gaudet;
ac uelut inclusum perfosso in pectore numen
et uiuam magnae speciem Virtutis adorant …

He, concealing deep in his mind his stifled blood-lust,
mildly, with heroism banished far from his face, says:
'Spare me, fellow-citizens; divert your weapons far from here.
Wounds will now not help at all towards my death:
that requires weapons not heaped on but pulled out from my breast.
Pick me up and put me down in Magnus' camp, still living;
do this for your general; let Scaeva be a model
of desertion from Caesar rather than of honourable death.'
Unlucky Aunus believed these feigned words
and did not see him holding his sword with hidden point:
and when about to lift the captive's limbs and weapons together
he received the lightning-fast sword fully in the throat.
His energy grew hot and, refreshed by a single killing,
he says: 'Whoever hoped that Scaeva was subdued must pay
the penalty.' […]
As he falls, a crowd of comrades
catch him and, rejoicing, set him fainting on their shoulders;
and they worship the deity, so to speak, confined inside
his stabbed breast and the living semblance of mighty Heroism.

27. A clear indication of the literary conscience of the genre in Scaeva, key to understanding the process of inverting the *aristeia* model, that Lucan intends, cf. Hömke (2010: 96).

Conte, in his commentary on the passage, makes use of the term grotesque as many as four times to describe different moments in the account of Scaeva;[28] however, in his general opinion of the scene, prior to the analysis (1981: 45–46), he indicates: "Solo grazie alla continuità espressiva di un 'sublime' drammatico sempre teso, l'iperbole riuscirà ad eludere l'insidia del grottesco (un insidia che si annida solitamente nel gusto per la costruzione sorprendente, e che qui si fa particolarmente pericolosa)." A more radical opinion on this and other scenes from the *Bellum Ciuile* is that of Johnson (1987: 57), who qualifies the scenes we have analyzed as absurd violence, as grotesque butchery,[29] and speaks of a Lucan epic convention, that he defines as "parodic subversion of the martial arts that entails a radical rejection of the idea of *virtus* on which the epic is founded. This pattern of subversion crystalizes in Book 6 in the grotesque *aristeia* of Scaeva." Barstch (1997: 193–194) goes even further in his assessment of the scene featuring the Roman centurion:

> His own behavior (196–246) verges on the territory of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* ("What are you going to do, bleed on me?").[30] Transfixed by a forest of spears, he is in the point of choosing an enemy on whom to fall when he is shot through the eye with an arrow … There can be few poems that are as brutal to the human body as Lucan's, though Ovid's *Metamorphoses* would be a strong contender …[31]

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28. Regarding the function of the simile in Luc. 6.208–213, Conte (1981: 92) indicates that its grotesque character is magnified by the minute detail with which Lucan argues the physical reasons for the invulnerability of the pachyderm. This Italian scholar (1981: 99) also applies the term grotesque to the she-bear simile.

29. Hömke (2010: 99) considers this passage "one of the most repulsive passages in ancient literature". Along this line, Bartsch (1997: 37) continues: "As more and more critics – with R. Johnson's (1987) interpretation in the vanguard – are coming to accept, it is too ridiculous, too absurd, to be tragedy. Its grotesqueries may provide us with a frisson of horror, but there is no emotion provoked: no Dido, no Euryalus, only the human body as a bundle of reactions".

30. Fitzgerald (2013: 193) uses the same example when he speaks of the *Bellum Ciuile* as an epic of the suicide, referring to Scaeva. A comparison with the fight scene between King Arthur and the black knight illustrates the distances: here we see the extreme of parody, whose intent is basically mockery and poking fun, it is evidently the extreme case that surpasses hyperbole in order to distort the meaning. Lucan's hyperbolic representation stops short of this; it elicits a response of unbelief, even mockery, but not fun. The movie scene aims for neither a realistic nor a morbid representation, but a parody of the heroic legend in comical terms; the dialog takes the same style, and the victim has no awareness of his situation, nor is any such emotion intended from the audience.

31. The episode of Scaeva has often been compared to the *aristeia* of Tydeus in Statius's *Thebaid* (8.701ff.), and parallels have also been drawn with the fight between Lapiths and Centaurs in Ovid, *Met.* 12.268ff. and 390ff. (Conte 1981: 85 and 98).

We have no doubt that, from the present-day reception of these episodes, all these interpretations are relevant; another question altogether is whether the contemporary reception of Lucan's day parallels our own. We feel it necessary to establish a balance between the two, not forgetting the warnings of Narducci (1999: 48), when he points to the net difference between horror and the ridiculous. While Narducci recognizes the presence of the unbelievable and unrealistic, and that Lucan, like Baroque as a whole, may at times seem caricaturesque, he notes that this trait is usually noted in the opinion of modern critics.

Despite these discrepancies, we may conclude that these macabre, grotesque details, sometimes extreme and ridiculous, find their place in a text that starts out with the express denial that heroism, characteristic of this genre, can be possible in a civil war (Luc. 1.12). The analogy of gladiator games elicits the emotions typical thereof, and provokes a reaction in the reader-spectator to the scenes that are presented, a reaction that ranges from sadistic voyeurism to total repulsion. The author first presents the description and then leads the reader with added comments, but these remain tangential, after the scene has already been developed, there is no comment on the repulsiveness of the scenes, only close-up views of them. As we have seen, emotions are neutralized before the brutality and extravagance of the images, and the reader is left at the mercy of one after another. Similarly, the density of the intertextual references (Conte 1988: 11–38) hinders one's emotional reactions.[32] There are two ways that the text asserts itself, in different directions: (1) as a literary text full of artifice, drawing attention to the artifice itself, and (2) as encouraging the reader to feel distant from the representation of reality due to its excess, reducing the images to something so unrealistic that they become more bearable.[33] All in all, contemplation of a spectacle of this type is always problematic and Lucan deliberately exploits the ambiguities of the literary device.[34] Hence, there

32. In this regard we follow the same distinctions used by Gervais (2013: 139, nn. 3 and 4).

33. One must keep in mind that there are attenuating elements of one's affective reaction to the scenes represented, and these contribute to a more complex reading of Lucan's text. Gervais (2013), in his comparative analysis of the violence in Statius and Tarantino, speaks of distance created by the intertextuality (we may speak of the distance of excess and the grotesque), making the actions unrealistic: on one hand they make us present at the scene, but on the other hand, they tell us that this is art, not reality.

34. A matter pointed out by Leigh (1995: 238) and also Lovatt (2013: 285), in regard to the circus show: "Watching gladiatorial spectacle could be a paradoxical experience: encourage dehumanisation of those fighting, or heightened emotional identification? The emotional response of a massed crowd, fans and partisans, cheering and groaning, makes gladiators both more than and less than human beings. The other mode of viewing gladiatorial battle which is clearly on display in ancient descriptions and discussion of gladiators is a moral and judgment mode".

is a variety of reader responses, as is clearly manifest in the dissension among critics. The meticulous description, lacking any indication of emotions, is essential to this strategy, quite the opposite of what occurs in Virgil, where the idea of otherness always adds shades of compassion to how one looks upon the victims (Mazzocchini 2000: 376). The inexistence of two sides, because ultimately they are one and the same, allows the poet to not prefer one over the other, and consequently, all the participants share the same stain and lack of glory. Heroism as a whole is questioned, there is no exception, as occurs in the other cases we studied.

5.

There are numerous examples of similar scenes offered by the Flavian poets, but we will limit ourselves to one scene from the *Punica* of Silius, given that this work deals with a historical topic in quite a different way than Lucan's; it recovers the traditional epic heroism, where protagonists consciously long for glory and constantly seek out visibility for their exploits within the spectacle of war (e.g. 4.606–607). As Micozzi (1999: 371) asserts, the survival of the Massilia model, which expresses a rejection of the Classical schemata and the search for an alternative to the traditional code, testifies that after the *Bellum Ciuile,* Lucan's epic could not be disregarded. The three Flavian epicists, Statius, Silius and Valerius Flaccus, will in some sense try to compose the antinomy, setting the genre on a new course, able to attain the extraordinary richness of themes from the *Bellum Ciuile*, adopting its effervescence and dissonant variety without betraying the dignity of the Homer-Virgil tradition.

A significant example of this can be seen in how Silius, an author who follows Lucan's lead in including scenes of mutilation and bloodshed, describes the death of Punic female warrior Asbyte (Sil. *Pun.* 2.189–210). Far from any intention of degrading her, the account of Asbyte's death is presented as heroic, but the pathetic description of her death focuses the reader's gaze on the gruesome details, as well as on the artist's skill in reelaborating the death of Virgil's Camilla (*Aen.* 11.789–849); exemplariness is not the primary theme, let alone the victim's suffering.[35] The poet must make an effort to draw out the heroic nature of the death, since his description, which places the dying protagonists in a horrific spectacle, endangers the representation of heroism.

35. The words of Spaltestein (1985), at the beginning of his commentary on this passage, draw out this aspect through a comparison with Virgil: "Verg. (*l.c.* n. 2, 136) avait pris soin de faire mourir Camille noblement, esthétiquement si l'on peut dire, et en donnant un grand relief pathétique à sa mort. Theron abat Asbyte d'une blessure affreuse et brutale, qui est bien dans le goût de cette époque (n.1, 171). Mais c'est aussi comme cela qu'Hercule tue les Amazones (Sen. *Herc. 0.* 1449 *stipite … ingesto*)". Reed's (2007: 19–22) analysis of the death of Camilla in Virgil is very enlightening.

6.

Silius's revival of the traditional epic model, while taking extreme and especially grotesque details as suitable for heroic deaths, may serve as our transition to examples selected from the *Spartacus* series, since the idea of glory and the typical values of the epic are also present there.

Taking this line of analysis, we will finally proceed to a comparison of these authors and contemporary artistic productions, marginal or marginalized, such as the recent television series *Spartacus,* whose Classical-themed content brings about certain proximity to the epic. The series presents extreme violence, focusing in on the violent aspects, and uses the right technical methods to exploit the close-up, getting down to the finest detail of the macabre, as the critical opinion would demonstrate. The first season, *Blood and Sand*, as well as its prequel, *Gods of the Arena*, focus on the world of the gladiators and exploit the possibilities of representing gory amphitheater scenes to the maximum.

In the third season, we find accounts of battles or conflicts where violence is represented with thoroughness and detail, as well as absolutely repulsive images of mutilated corpses – entrails exposed – after an ambush, and a battlefield littered with dead bodies after formal combat (episode 7). This scene is similar to the stereotypes of after-combat battlefield descriptions found in Classical historiography and epic. Logically, in this part of the series we see less of the amphitheater setting, but occasionally it is brought in by presenting the fights as spectacle, as we shall see below.

Among the numerous possible scenes from the *Spartacus* series, we have selected two of the most representative, although we will allude to others when deemed necessary. The choice is based on appropriateness for our study, on account of their extreme brutality that can be considered grotesque, as well as the physical settings where they take place.[36] Specifically, we examine first the fight scene in the sand of Capua, between the Greek Theokoles and the two main *ludus* fighters from Batiatus, the Gallic Crixus and the Thracian Spartacus. Next, we will analyze the series of contests organized by Spartacus as games in honor of Crixus. The setting is to a certain degree passed down from the epic tradition; but though this is taken as a starting point, distance from this tradition is introduced by exchanging a competition for an extreme representation of cruelty and death.[37]

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36. As Winkler (2005: 88) notes: "The double-edged fascination the images of violence, war, and death exert on us is nowhere better seen than in the cinema. Films set in ancient Rome have held a prominent place in this tradition". This study focuses on the film *Gladiator* (2000), directed by Ridley Scott, but *Spartacus* (2010–2013) amply surpasses former productions in this aspect.

37. This epic convention, which goes back to the games in honor of Hector, represented in book 23 of the *Iliad*, is transformed into a utopian incarnation of the world upside down, where all excesses are justified.

The contest between the champions (episode 5, "Shadow Games") has certain traits that make it comparable to Scaeva's fight. The first of these comes from the context where it takes place. While the atmosphere of gladiatorial games in Lucan is the result of an intended evocation, in the series it is precisely the setting that characterizes the first season, which extends Spartacus's period as a gladiator much further than the works of cinema that precede it. The Coliseum is the key setting in many cinema productions of Romans, and especially in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000). Placing the conflict of our first scene in a symbolic substitute for the Coliseum, the amphitheater of Capua, helps highlight the importance and heroic nature of the fight, and offers an adequate context for the unrestrained presentation of a gory spectacle (Winkler 2005: 90ff.).

The enemy that the two main characters must face is an undefeated gladiator who has been nicknamed "the Shadow of Death." He is a gigantic being with a fearsome appearance that is accentuated by close-up views: a muscular body, full of scars, a fearsome stare, a mouth of rotten teeth, and one weak point: his eyes have intolerance to light. His image, like that of other characters from the gladiatorial world, such as Ixion,[38] is absolutely grotesque. The bloody story that precedes this episode is reminiscent of Scaeva, as well as the process of animalizing both characters, in the case of Lucan, through similes, in the series, through their own brutal appearance and especially through the use of the loud cry as a means of expression.

His appearance on the scene, like that of today's heroes in our stadiums (the closest modern example),[39] provokes a jubilant reaction in the audience, and fear in his opponents and their supporters. The course of the fight has two differentiated parts, a first part when the two gladiators, with amazing ease, defeat Theokoles, seemingly dead, to the unbelief of the protagonists and spectators. However, while they are celebrating the victory, the giant rises and begins to fight again.[40] On this occasion the final victory will be more difficult. Theokoles seriously wounds Crixus, who falls to the ground, while the giant, despite being thrust through with a spear that comes out his back, continues to fight. He only falls when, blinded by the sun's reflection in Crixus's helmet, he is attacked by Spartacus. Once fallen to his knees,

38. A gigantic gladiator who fights using the face that he cuts off his defeated opponent as a mask (season 1, episode 4).

39. Despite being a spectacle where the lives of the main characters are at stake, it is presented to resemble as closely as possible the great sporting contests. This has two results: on one hand it seeks to bestow on the fighters the prestige of contestants, and on the other, it requires the spectator to take sides with one of the two contenders.

40. The giant's unexpected comeback, after being thought dead, brings to mind the unexpected twists of action in battle accounts; however, the outlandish aura of the whole event is more reminiscent of horror movie stereotypes.

the Thracian uses his two spears to cut off his head in a spectacularly bloody scene, which furthermore is repeated on numerous occasions throughout the series.

In order to create more realism and proximity to the scene, and to place the viewer within the amphitheater itself, every possible tactic is used to show close-ups of the wounds. Especially striking are the wounds of Crixus – one belly wound exposes part of the gut – and the final decapitation of Theokoles produces streams of blood. In addition, the frequent use of slow motion increases the impact of the details shown.[41]

The emotions of the audience have little to do with the suffering of the main characters, but merely with their preferences or passions. The laughter caused by the death of the Greek giant is offset by the pain expressed in the face of Crixus's lover, when he is seriously wounded.[42] The focus of the scene changes rapidly, moving frequently from the fighters to the spectators, and from the general panorama to the particular detail.[43] Different viewer perspectives are observed, the *ludus* comrades, with their united expression, and the occupants of the box seats, who are divided between supporters of one group or the other, according to interest: Batiatus and Solonius, each one supporting his champion; Lucretia, Ilithia and Naevia, Crixus's lover,[44] focusing on the outcome according to their economic or amorous interests. Finally, there is the audience in general, who show typical fan behavior on behalf of the different fighters.[45] The camera pauses only to capture the suffering of Batiatus's pair of gladiators; the Greek fighter, however, shows no feeling at all and is even presented with traits of an animal. Even his final fall is seen in the background, while the foreground is given to a representation of wounded Crixus's pain and the reaction of his lover. The intended facial expressions are therefore quite different: some show empathy, others are distant and only involved in the visual appeal of what they

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41. Techniques from both videogames and cinema, cf. Simmons (2011: 135–136): super-imposition, chroma-key and bullet-time.

42. The excessive vividness of the representation guides the spectator's focus to the gruesome detail and away from any sympathetic emotion toward the character, cf. Augoustakis & Cyrino (2017:1–6).

43. In the scene of Scaeva, Lucan also makes use of frequent changes of perspective between general overview and detail, cf. Hömke (2010: 101), who refers us to Meteling (2006) for the description and use of this technique in the genre of horror or splatter films.

44. The emotional reactions and the power structure, the slave's total dependency in every sense, are clearly shown in this type of scene. The gladiator's dependency on these structures enables the viewer to identify with the main characters.

45. The relations between spectators and protagonists are not transitive, there is no identification of community with hero, unlike what occurs in the contest between Aeneas and Turnus, cf. Rossi (2003: 160), given that their contest so far is an individual one. Lucan also avoids these kinds of identification, since he is dealing with a civil war.

are seeing, and their bias toward one character. In the case of Theokoles, identification with the fighter is not intended, as indicated by the techniques mentioned. The recourse of alluding to the mythical victory of Perseus over Medusa – Theokoles falls victim to the blinding reflection of the sun in Crixus's shield, rationalized by the giant's photophobia – is one more instrument to establish emotional distance from this character (Gervais 2013: 143ff.). The second example, which consists of a succession of especially gruesome, bloody scenes, is the series of games organized in honor of the death of Crixus (*War of the Damned*, episode 9: "The dead and the dying"), from the final season, when Spartacus and his comrades have already been liberated from the *ludus* and the amphitheater. On this occasion, nonetheless, that setting is recreated once again for the purpose of presenting death as a spectacle for the audience. The context where it is presented evokes typical scenes from the epic in which games or sporting contests are celebrated in honor of dead heroes. Thus, what the series actually presents is a massacre of Roman soldiers, a succession of horrible deaths that culminates with decapitation and throwing the bloody head to the audience, who receives it with glee. Elsewhere, the Classical authors already reported the event, interpreting it as an inversion of daily reality: the Romans became the gladiators and the slaves became the spectators.[46] The series only partly maintains such an inversion, since the gladiator, Spartacus, has become a hero, and his superiority in the contest places him very much above his Roman opponents on the scale of heroism.

The show-like quality is reinforced because the contests take place in a theater, in an impossible physical space (Simmons 2011: 13), where the spectators occupy the stands and celebrate every wound with laughter and every death with unbridled delight. In this scene the changing camera focus is less striking: shots of the general audience alternate with specific characters, but always capturing a similar reaction. The mockery of others' deaths, justified morally as revenge for the death of comrades, reaches its full measure here. The absence of affect is lessened only by a few, brief shots of the face of Tiberius (son of Crassus in the series), who is among the prisoners. The totally negative portrayal of this character, typical of a villain (arrogant, ambitious, cruel, rapist), blocks any feeling of sympathy toward his reactions while viewing the death of his companions. Death is turned into something recreational, presented as fun, and in an absolutely grotesque fashion. The degradation of the Roman soldiers through such grotesque presentation is evident.

The excess of violence has often been blamed on movies and especially videogames, and especially when these are set in Classical Antiquity (Macías 2013: 217).

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46. The event is alluded to by Appian, *BC* 1.117, and indirectly by Cicero, *De haruspicum responso* 26, where the same inverted roles are represented: the slaves are spectators, and the Romans, gladiators.

The recreation of the amphitheater is an extraordinary opportunity for unhindered exhibition of violence. On this point, Lucan and the Flavian writers concur in presenting a fighting death as a kind of show; so does the *Spartacus* series, but in a different way. Another matter altogether are movies and television, where technical means enable such complete realism that it would replace direct contemplation. The sensation is that of witnessing the events live, as real spectators. This sensation is intensified in a work where spectacle itself is one of the main objects, allowing the spectacle within the spectacle, a technique familiar to the ancients in accounts of war and descriptions of sporting competitions within epic literature, as we have noted.[47] The use of this recourse can serve different purposes: it may contribute either to greater affective involvement of the spectator, or to distancing, as when the use of hyperreal images tends to hypnotize the audience, and the technique itself becomes the object of admiration, the emotion of the victims, something distant. Add to this an excess in presenting the most horrific details, and the representation loses credibility, either creating insensitivity or causing the spectator to look away in horror.[48] Unlike exposure to violence in Antiquity, in today's world exposure to violence is through the media, even when the violence is real. For this reason, the way violence is presented is critical, not only the fact that it is presented. In the case of the *Spartacus* series, these tactics are constant,[49] but, with regard to the specific case of grotesque deaths, a further qualification should be made. While the distinction between the two sides, characterized as total opposites in the moral sense, helps to eliminate possible difficulties in interpretation, any possibility of relating to the other side is diminished. The deaths on one side are ridiculed, while deaths on the other side are shown with some restraint, or the possibly grotesque aspect is softened through different techniques. This practice is common in comics, especially in superhero comics, where the most horrible, grotesque or ridiculous deaths are reserved for villains, and moreover are presented in such hyperbolic fashion – thanks to the possibilities of this genre – that it surpasses the credible. In the

47. See the references indicated in Note 5.

48. The emphatic usage of visual excess in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*', as noted by Simmons (2011: 130), "is intentional, allowing the series to operate as a vehicle for the pleasurable extremes that certain pop cultural texts often offer. Distinctly embodies a camp "love of the exaggerated". Cf. more recently McAuley (2017: 175–91), and Gardner & Potter (2017:211–228)

49. Simmons (2011: 138) highlights the novelty of this work within the world of TV: "While later episodes of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* see the show maturing somewhat, with the narrative depending in complexity along with the characterization, the show's continued reliance on the camp excesses of video game aesthetic and narrative conventions results in a program that remains unusual in the contemporary television landscape for acknowledging and foregrounding its own artificiality".

TV series as well we can observe a tendency to assign grotesque deaths to the main characters' enemies, so that the way the violence is presented keeps the audience from any possible empathic reaction (Simmons 2011: 132–133). Quite different is the death of our protagonists, Crixus and especially Spartacus (*The War of the Damned*, episodes 9 and 10, respectively). Obviously, these deaths are imbued with a high dose of violence and gruesomeness, emphasizing the protagonists' extreme resistance against all credibility: the Thracian is pierced with three spears in the back, and even so, he manages to say: "give me a sword." However, many means are taken to try to counteract undesired effects. The death of Spartacus is not presented in show-like fashion, and the hero is thus conferred his dignity. Emotion is elicited through different methods that help provoke sympathy in the audience: the hero's last words, the presence of women who mourn his death and the appropriate music. If, like Simmons (2011: 136–137), we understand Spartacus to be functioning like an avatar in a videogame, the distancing with respect to the Romans who fall as his victims becomes even clearer.

With these premises, and taking into account the success of the series, this direct representation of extreme violence, the fascination with painting death in all its details, can hardly be understood as intended to provoke repulsion, and thereby promote the rejection of violence. Instead, the opposite seems to be true. Of course, this does not mean that the series does not arouse repulsion or rejection, as in fact it does, regardless of the author's intention.[50]

7.

We will recapitulate in order to clarify the main ideas that follow from our study. First, while observing a great distance in the ideology behind these literary and cinematographic texts, at the same time we also see similar procedures for describing violence. In both cases, spectators are involved in a problematic response; although, let truth be told, this is much less so with the series, on account of its Manichean bias toward one of the sides – yet even here, the response is not a simple one.

Second, it may be said that the essential difference lies in this point: in a series like Spartacus, where violence is one of its identifying features, and all of its characters are affected, an effort is made to soften or avoid elements that may ridicule one of the two sides, the heroes' side, while reserving the most grotesque images

50. In this way they become a test of one's capacity for tolerating the horror represented, and raise questions about one's attitude when facing these images violence. The words of Bartsch, quoted in Note 29, are not to be forgotten.

for the villains' side. In Lucan, because of his decision to invert a heroic model that cannot be maintained in a civil war, such distinctions are not made, and the expression of the extreme is universal. The work of Silius falls into an intermediate space, where the macabre does not so often reach the grotesque, and there is an attempt to soften its possible appearance through author commentary, to preserve the honor of the hero or heroine.

Third, in each work analyzed here, the aim is a sense of total presence on the scene, of proximity to the object described, but the very excess and artificiality of what is narrated exposes the truth of its artistic nature, its non-reality, with its exhibition of literary mechanisms. The intertextual density, more visible through stylistic effects (descriptive precision) in one case, and through technical expressive means in the other, the aesthetic proximity to Zack Snyder's film *300,* for example, and to videogames, the "camp excess," all stand in the way of empathy, and even any sense of sympathizing with the characters. However, at the same time, they influence the representation by softening its gruesomeness and making the contemplation of blood more tolerable.

Fourth, this procedure finds its meaning in how the works studied here were conceived. The *Bellum Ciuile,* on one hand, delivers history and fiction, and on the other hand, a cultural reality that was foreign to the epic, with one of its objectives being to downgrade the exploits presented. Continuous recourse to the excesses of violence and the grotesque adequately responds to the conception of civil war as a misfortune that transforms heroism into an absurdity. The *Spartacus* series delivers fiction, but does so through an alien cultural reality, already codified, making use of the component of violence as a spectacle, with the pretext of making as faithful a representation as possible. The recourse to violence is not upheld with any profound reason, as in the case of Lucan, but it is converted into an attraction. By using the techniques mentioned to present it, it becomes trivialized and any emotional response toward victims of the other side is obstructed.

Fifth, this analysis seeks to offer a reflection on the way that violence is presented, where different types of motives are involved, such as the desire to reflect the brutality of reality in a certain society or in a certain period. We also note other factors with greater impact, though at times we may not wish to acknowledge them, such as the seductiveness of violence and its frequent use as a means of entertainment in contemporary society.

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Oedipus in Manhattan

From Sophocles to Woody Allen

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Ductility is a characteristic of myth: provided that its fixed core isn't altered, every kind of transformation is possible within it. Thus, the well-known oedipian myth in Sophocles' version can be traced with changes in Woody Allen's *Oedipus rex.* Perhaps because it belongs to the film *New York Stories* this version has been unregarded by critics. The wicked Greek hero becomes another wicked one: the Jew.

Keywords: Sophocles, Oedipus, Woody Allen, Classical Tradition

Ducunt uolentem fata, nolentem trahunt
(Seneca, *Letters* 107, 11)

> I believe that today we are witnessing a kind of rebirth of this sense of the tragic in life; each of us is aware of the ambiguity of the human condition. Perhaps that is why these Greek gods who, as I earlier suggested, seem to form a kind of language, continue, when we listen to them, to mean something to us.
> (J. P. Vernant, *Myth and society in ancient Greece*, 1982, 109)

My contribution is part of the broader and more ambitious framework of the research project *Marginalia*, which aims, using the expression of Novalis, to "evoke" the classical legacy in the margins of what is usually understood by Culture with capital C. We do not share the hospital drama experienced by the apparently sick classical world. On the contrary, leaving aside the different arguments used by some, the state of health of this "imaginary" sick person, as we just imagine it (cf. Beard 2013: 1–14), we stand on the other side of the spectrum, in this culture in lowercase, no less interesting and which gives a true account of the survival of the classics: movies, video games, advertisements, TV series, comics, children's literature, etc. In this line of work the "classic," with all the considerations and ambiguities that the term provokes, is the key to access the comparison with "other" cultures in a truly global sense (Settis 2006: 1–8; 82–90).

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My contribution in these pages focuses on the presence of this legacy in one of the arts that has formed much of the imagery of the twentieth century, Cinema. Indeed, even if from its early days it was considered a "minor" phenomenon, it has revealed itself, among other things, as one of the means of transmission-circulation and re-elaboration of the classical legacy, since from its first manifestations it showed a deep interest for history and, more precisely, that of Greece and Rome (Pérez Gómez 1996: 235–261). Without going into an exhaustive review, it is worth remembering that among the first images shown in cinema there is a French short film, produced by the Lumière brothers, made by G. Hatot and directed by A. Promio in 1896, entitled *Neron essayant des poisons sur des sclaves*. The first films rewriting of the Greco-Roman past are significant: in 1905, L. Nonguet releases *Les martyres chretiens*; in 1907, G. Méliès *La Mort de Jules Cesar* and S. Olcott *Ben-Hur*. The genre gained strength from *Cabiria* (1914) by G. Pastrone and it currently consists of a large number of movies. A synthesis can be seen in Grafton, Most & Settis (2010: 197–200). Thus began, *avant la lettre*, the first peplum of film history.[1] The interest aroused at first by the history of Greece and Rome, or by classical literature and its myths, was soon enriched by films that are classics today: *Quo Vadis* (1951) by Marvyn le Roy, *Julius Caesar* (1953) by J. L. Manckiewicz o *Spartacus* (1960) by S. Kubrick. Both major Hollywood productions and those produced in Cinecittà covered various aspects of the Greco-Roman world: the story of the most fascinating characters, historical events, the heroes of mythology, etc. Moreover, the genre seems to collect unique works which are difficult to classify, such as the *Satyricon* (1969) by F. Fellini, *Scipione, detto anche l'Africano* (1971) by L. Magni o *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966) by R. Lester.

This footprint or "immortal seed" (Balló & Pérez 2007[4]) is not found exclusively in the subgenre known under the label "Roman Film," which is currently experiencing a curious revival since in 2000 R. Scott directed Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*, but in other film genres that have interpreted, rewritten and reinterpreted, themes, motifs, myths, etc., giving irrefutable evidence that this legacy is not dead, not even wounded. In parallel to the phenomenon, scholars have become more interested in some cultural events, undoubtedly deserving more attention than they had been receiving in previous decades.[2]

Once this brief clarification is made, the object of these pages focuses on one of the cinematic treatments of the Oedipus myth, a peculiar and enigmatic Greek hero from its name, closer to the *Märchen* or *folktale* than to an epic hero (Nilsson

1. Cf. Garel (1976: 324–325); Beylie (1983: 315–316); Cano (1985: 1–16); Solomon (2001).

2. Cf. AAVV (1979: III, 112–115; 125–127, and IV, 19–24); AAVV (1982: 1884–1887); Attolini (1991: 431–493); Elley (1984); Wyke (1997); Blanshard & Shahabuddin (2011); Renger & Solomon (2013).

1972: 103–112, and Ruipérez 2006: 77–85). Oedipus is not the son of a god, he does not prove his value in war and die fighting, but he is born "cursed".[3] Not without reason the tragedy of Sophocles Ὀιδίπους τύραννος, the perfect tragedy, has been regarded by critics as the paradigmatic example of *Fatumtragödien* (cf. Pratt 1983: 96, and Müller 1953: 447–464). However, we must remember the long tradition of the myth previous to Sophocles, although the work of this author has been the most influential in Western literature (cf. Ruipérez 2006; Bettini & Guidorizzi 2004, and García Gual 2012). Our hero, thanks to the ductility of the myths, has been experiencing various re-workings through various significant systems, at different times, by different authors and in different spaces. However, as required by the code, it has maintained immovable nuclei. Although known, I summarize the basic pillars of the history of this singular hero: an oracle advised Laius, king of Thebes, not to beget a son because, by not following the warning, that child will cause his death and would marry his own mother. Recipients know that the oracles are always met and that the conditions are never met. Indeed, Laius, while drunk, impregnates his wife Jocasta and the cursed child is born, the "intellectual hero" comes from Greek mythology (cf. Brombert 1969: 239–265). Immediately, the child is left with feet crossed by fibulae, to certain death on Mount Kithairon. Several issues of folklore are merged here, which, following the analysis of Propp, I summarise below: abandoning a new-born (with marks that allow recognition), collected and brought up in another Country, crucial meeting for his future, victorious struggle with the monster, wedding with a princess / queen and conquer of the royal sceptre. The theme of the child left to himself is, for example, present in Calderón, in *La vida es sueño*: Segismundo is abandoned in a cave by his father as an oracle prophesied that his son will dethrone him (Frenzel 1999: 349-358 and 2005: Ödipus). The motifs of the myth have been studied by Propp (1995: 82–120) and the documented study by Delcourt (1944) in a well documented work.

Following the development of the myth, we know that the solution conceived by the king was useless, and Laius naive to believe he could escape his fate, as shepherds find the child, take pity on him and deliver it to another king, Polybius, the king of Corinth, whose wife, Merope had no offspring. As son of these, Oedipus grows until one day, due to the intervention of others, begins to have doubts about his true origin. If there is one trait, besides being a victim of fate, which characterises Oedipus, this is his "curiosity," the quality that turned him into the "intellectual"[4] hero. In his quest to discover the truth, he takes a trip to the oracle of Delphi,

3. On the development and transformations of the concept of heroic cf. Nagy (2013: 89–109) and Paduano (2008: 7–19). About ancient Greece in cinema, cf. Valverde García (2010: 129–146).

4. The hero represents the structure of the research survey, cf. Balló & Pérez (2007[4]: 255–257).

which actually confirms his deepest fears: one day he will kill his father and marry his own mother. Convinced that his parents are Merope and Polybius, he flees Corinth with the intention of never returning. However, fate meets him on his way as he runs into his real father, and not giving him way, he kills him, ignoring that he was the king of Thebes. The only mistake -the term sin being not suitable- was allowing himself to be carried away by anger, and the tragic irony that lies in meeting a fate he was trying to escape.

An important piece of information to emphasize the heroic character of Oedipus, or his uniqueness as a person (or character) who possesses qualities that are denied to other mortals, is provided by his encounter with the Sphinx, the *monstrum* that tormented the Theban people, killing all those who failed to solve her riddles. Oedipus, in possession of a "knowledge," "passes the challenge" by solving the riddle and as a reward, he marries the queen of Thebes. I want to point out here that in all dealings of the myth, both in the Greek and Roman world, the idea of incest torments Oedipus and it is the reason he had fled Corinth. Anything but the Oedipus's complex known thanks to Freud's interpretation (Freud 1920), who transferred, for the first time, the idea of the functioning of the dreams from repressed or censored desires. Given that, after Sophocles, Freud was one of those who most influenced the survival of myth-complex, it should be noted that psychiatric interpretation, as the author himself recognised from the beginning, is based on his personal reading of the tragedy and that he knew the main theme of the work: Destiny (Freud 1999). From here, largely, is my interest in the film remaking made by Woody Allen. This version is much closer to that of Sophocles despite what some commentators influenced by Freudian interpretation have pointed out.

Once this clarification is made and by continuing with the myth, when Oedipus is believed safe from his destiny and occupies the throne of Thebes, a fearful epidemic falls on his realm terminating food and men. In Sophocles' tragedy the chorus asks for help from the king, while in Seneca's, it is the king who for asks help to unravel the reasons of this plague (cf. Pérez Gómez 2012: 663–755). Both in the Greek and Latin tragedy, Oedipus, as a public man, makes every effort to discover the culprit to free Thebes from the deadly scourge. That search becomes the discovery of his own origin, a journey existing in several films: from *Spellbound* (1945) by A. Hitchcock or even *Total Recall* (1990) by P. Verhoeven. In the Sophocles' drama, Tiresias reveals the truth, while Seneca, in his *Oedipus*, introduces a magic scene in which Laius appears for vengeance. In this process towards knowledge the hero's desire to know the truth is interesting, although this entails his self-punishment and exile, synonymous of death in both Greek and Latin culture.

Following these observations and entering the field of cinema, it is not surprising that from very early on the Oedipus myth has caught the attention of directors, an interest revealed by two silent films: *Oedipo re* (1902) by the French director and actor A. Calmettes and *Edipo re* (1909) by G. De Liguoro, versions which follow reproductively Sophocles' work. With its unique style P. P. Pasolini moved the myth into the 1920s and settled it into a bourgeois family in Lombardy in his *Edipo re* (1967). The trip to the Greek mythical past that the Freudian reading presents is used by the director to discover the chiaroscuro of his social being. The same mythical background is underlying in *Oedipus Mayor* (1996), from a G. G. Márquez script, directed by the Colombian J. Alí Triana. Oedipus is sent as mayor to a town in the Colombian Andes at the time when Laius is kidnapped and killed in a shootout. A search is carried out and in that time the mayor meets the wife of the dead Laius, Jocasta, and falls for her. From this point, the search and discovery of his own origin begins. An urban version of Sophocles' tragedy, from the Hyperborean Oedipus show is the *Oedipus* (2004) by director R. Ruiz, representative of the Chilean socialist realism.

Very different is *Incendies* (2010) a film directed by the Canadian D. Villeneuve on a play written by Wajdi Movawad: Jeanne and Simon Marwan are twins whose mother, who hasn't spoken for a long time, dies. When the opening takes place, the notary gives them two letters to be delivered respectively to his father, who they had believed dead, and to a brother, whose existence was unknown to them. They both start a journey to Lebanon where they find the answer to their existence.

The mentioned films are based on Sophocles' play, a tragedy faithfully followed in a passive-reproductive manner, while others are active-productive. Missing, in this sense, a rewriting, no less interesting and surreal, the W. Allen *Oedipus Wrekcs*[5] one, one of the three shorts stories making up the film *New York Stories*, which was co-directed by W. Allen, F. Ford Coppola and M. Scorsese and released in 1989. At the beginning, the common denominator is New York. With this city as a backdrop, more specifically Manhattan, Woody Allen shot a surreal comedy based, with the appropriate changes, on the Oedipus' myth. Apart from the emphasis on the pace, the director, writer and actor of the film, when talking about his film with E. Lax, recognised that long ago he had planned to do a story about a "certain" theme.

He did not need this theme, probably because it was too compromising and that is why, in my opinion, he dealt with it in his contribution to *New York Stories*. His *Oedipus Wrecks* was translated into Spanish as *Edipo reprimido,* Repressed Oedipus, a translation-interpretation influenced more by Freud that by the vision of the film.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first meaning of the verb to wreck is "sinking" or, in its transitive form, "causing the shipwreck." In any of its

5. This is not his only film with a classic title: *Cassandra's Dream, Mighty Aphrodite*; cf. Savenkova (2013). About his interest in classical tragedy Gilabert Barberà (2008: 1–18, y 2009: 279–293); Pérez Gómez (2014: 89–99).

forms it means "to repress." I therefore propose the translation "*Edipo naufraga*" (literally *Oedipus Wrecks)*, as the protagonist, like the hero of the Greek mythology, tries in vain to escape his fate only to fall flat on it. And also because according to the author, the titles with more than one word are ambitious, so that the correct translation is key here (cf. Lax 2007: 73).

Certainly, behind the title beats a pun on the English pronunciation of Oedipus wrecks, very close to the English translation of the tragedy *Oedipus rex*, and *The King*.

In short, this film was written, directed by and starred Woody Allen, who plays Sheldon, a Jewish lawyer working in an important law firm, but despite his success, is distressed because of his absorbent mother, protective and domineering, from who he is constantly trying to escape at all costs, even hiding his Jewish name Millstein behind Mills, which repeatedly berates his mother. The change of name is significant because it represents the character's desire to flee from his Semitic origin, a key getaway for the interpretation that I propose here.

The film begins with a common place in Woody Allen's films: Sheldon is in the consulting room of his psychoanalyst. His psychoanalyst looks like the rabbi of all atheist Jews and, regardless of the character neurosis (and / or the director's one), he could be considered an external spectator who contemplates and interprets, as the chorus of the classical tragedies, being a resource that the director also uses in one of his others films: *Mighty Aphrodite*. He does not act; he just commentates and allows the transition from one sequence to another. Without preamble, the protagonist presents himself:

> I'm fifteen years old, I am a partner in a big law firm, you know, I am very successful and I still haven't resolved my relationship with my mother. You know, I had a dream the other night that she died.

Immediately visible to the spectator is the dream in which Sheldon drives a hearse with a coffin from which, even dead, with her surly tone, his mother points the way and tells him: "turn left," complains about him driving the long way round and orders him to proceed slowly, even though Sheldon is driving at 40 km per hour. The psychoanalyst, after hearing the dream, asks his patient if he would like his mother out of his life. The response of the anguished character, despite the hesitation is unambiguous: yes, Sheldon does wish his mother out of his life.

> I don't know … My mother always humiliates me, she always finds some way … She would speak so loudly … It always made me self-conscious; she just gives me a hard time; she's critical. Listen, what can I say? I love her, but I wish she would disappear.

Against all Freudian interpretations, Sheldon, far from desiring his mother, would rather escape from her. Same thing happened to the author. Allen states that he got along better with his father than with his mother, he was the person who exerted authority at home. He added that when his sister first saw the completed film, she laughed out loud and pointed out the resemblance to their own mother (cf. Lax 2007: 40). In line with the classical myth, the tormented character of the film tries to deviate from his origin and therefore, even if not leaving the town as Oedipus did, has changed his surname. The origin remains a curse, though clearly transformed, in this case for being Jewish.

In his effort to move away from his destiny, Sheldon is engaged to a woman who is the antithesis of his mother, blonde, elegant, from a wealthy American family, Christian and with three children (Lisa – Mia Farrow). We meet her in the second scene of the film, in which a terrified Sheldon goes with his fiancée to have dinner at his mother's house. After having opened the door, the audience meets a tiny old lady who cannot stop talking (Mae Questel). To an innocent and polite question made by her son: "How are you?" She replies with a "Gee, you look terrible!" "you're losing your hair." In the midst of an unpleasant situation, Linda compliments the house, but the old lady replies: "He doesn't like it … He thinks it's too Jewish. You know his name is not Sheldon Mills, it's Millstein! (He has changed it)."

Sheldon tries to intervene in vain since his mother silences him again and again with a resounding: "Be quiet! I'm talking to her!."

At dinner and despite all efforts made by the couple, as expected, the mother does not hesitate to express her displeasure at the young blonde with three children. While Lisa is being asked questions, the mother continues to give orders to her son, "take some bread and butter" […] "I'm not completely bald. – You will be" (like your father). "Eat your dessert!."

Without any nice words or delicacy, she finds out about Lisa's work in an advertising agency and being mother of three children, while ordering her son to eat his dessert, as if he were a real child. After the dinner, the seemingly harmless old lady sits on the couch with Lisa, the sophisticated New Yorker, to show her pictures of her son when he was little, images that do have the consent of the mother. In her comments to her son she says, "He was adorable" Sheldon protests and meets a resounding: "Be quiet!." As if that were not enough, the mother shames the fifty-year-old informing his fiancée about minute details like the fact that "He used to wet the bed." At the end of the evening, at the farewell, the mother appears forceful and addressing her son says: "Listen Sheldon! Don't get married! […] After all where do you come to a blonde with three children? What are you, an astronaut?"

Without any pause for the audience, the unfortunate character finds himself again at the psychoanalyst talking about another deed of his mother. And live, immediately, we see Sheldon's workplace and the character during an important meeting of the mummified law firm. To the amazement of the crowd, a secretary interrupts the meeting to announce a phone call for Sheldon, who, troubled, peeks out to an empty hallway where, in the distance, his mother and his Aunt Ceil (Jessie

Keosiam) appear. Excited, after having watched *Cats*, they move towards him at speed. Simultaneously the audience hear "Sing Sing Sing" (Benny Goodman and Gene Grupa): the *tam-tam* begins to be heard, interrupted by these two fearsome old ladies, not even reaching five feet tall. With the boldness at which they speed forward, the comic threat can be sensed.[6] With total disregard for the work of her son, the mother argues that the reason for the visit is the "urgent" need to show Aunt Ceil Sheldon's office. The mother does not lose the opportunity to embarrass him when, at introducing her to one of Sheldon's colleagues, who had left the meeting in his search, without any qualms she tells the aunt: "this is Bates, the one with the mistress."

Yet, aiming to please Sheldon's mother and with the best intentions, Lisa phones her and invites her for Sunday lunch, also seeing the chance to introduce her to the children. Immediately the audience sees a nice restaurant where it is possible to eat outdoors, circumstance that the old woman deeply dislikes and does not hesitate to criticise. Without giving up, they take her to a magic show, although she continues to express her displeasure: "I don't know why you brought me here! I'm not crazy about it … Is this a trick? I don't know … this is a nothing!" The magician asks someone from the audience to come up on stage, someone special, a "princess" and the choice is none other than Sheldon's unpleasant mother. She rises from her seat armed with her handbag, not leaving it because she carries photos and documents inside, and in the short path she has to walk to the stage, she has already informed every one of her son's existence, and of course, she complains about him having had his Jewish surname changed. Amidst her incessant chatter, she is put into a magic box; the magician passes it through the machine with two solid steel swords: between the first and second "saber slash" Sheldon's face fills with joy and, in the last, he shows real satisfaction. The first part of the trick is already completed. Then the thing is to make her reappear safe and sound, but when the magician opens the box, the old woman has disappeared! No one can explain how such a miracle has happened and, despite all efforts to find her, the mouthy mother is gone. Something never seen before. So far, the audience had been seeing a realistic comedy, but now a turnabout[7] occurs.

Neither the magician, worried about his show, nor Sheldon, relatively calm, want to call the police. The son seeks a rational explanation and goes to his aunt, who is deaf and does not know where the mother is, or what she is being asked

6. In this respect, the suggestions made by Woody Allen to potential mothers during the casting appear very interesting; cf. Lax (2007: 140): "Be contemptuous […] He's your son and you loves him, but be contemptuous right from the star".

7. Until the present moment, behind the comedy does not stop beating a tragedy, an ambivalence that Woody Allen has dealt with in several of his films; cf. Green (1991: 70–76).

for, so unsuccessfully, the protagonist calls the Missing Persons line, hospitals, etc. He appears to return to his work routine, though, worried, he has hired a private detective. After three days of fruitless searching, concerned, he returns to his apartment, where his fiancée Lisa comforts him with excellent results and they end up in bed. In addition, Lisa is surprised because Sheldon had never "behaved" as well as on that occasion, something that is attributed to "being calm, completely relaxed."

At the psychoanalyst consultation, the internal spectator recognises that he feels like "a new man." "It's like a great weight has been lifted from my shoulder," says Sheldon. He smiles more often and his sex life has improved. He arrives at the conclusion that the change has occurred just because "she" is gone. At this point, the reaction is similar to that of the mythical Oedipus when he thinks, being married to Jocasta, he has avoided incest with Merope, which he had for his mother. However, in this film Oedipus-Sheldon does not flee anywhere, but it is the mother who disappears. In this state of calm, he meets the detective he hired again to tell him to abandon the search, by claiming he has already found the woman. In the next sequence, Sheldon and Lisa, happy, look out over the terrace of their apartment. The lawyer has never felt better; however, the fate of the character who was born at the same time as him and Sheldon's corrosive mother appears not in Thebes, but in the sky of Manhattan, where she hangs out with all passers-by, making a fool of her son. The film predates the digital age, so that the difficulty to "fly" the face of the garrulous old woman up to the sky was enormous. The surreal aspect is already assured. As it is a film and like in the dramatic performance, one must consider the importance of other significant systems that multiply and underline the significance of the images. In this case, the music,[8] fundamental in Woody Allen's films, accompanying the appearance of the woman is *I'll Be Seeing You* and *In a Persian Market* by Albert W. Ketèlbey.

Oedipus at Thebes was forced to deal with an epidemic of the plague; Sheldon is forced to "exile" himself in his apartment because the talks of his "heavenly" mother with passers-by and the criticisms, of which he is the subject, make him a laughingstock of New Yorkers. Every time he goes outside, he is assaulted by the media and constantly insulted. His happiness ends when, after shopping in a store and leaving, his mother rebukes him and shows from the sky a childhood picture, telling the "problem" to passers-by: her son, who has changed his name, wants to marry a woman he's only known for six months, when he is still paying alimony to his ex-wife.

Once in his apartment, devastated, he understands the need to take down Seidy, his mother, from the sky. Desperate, like Oedipus was, he phones his secretary saying

8. On the analysis of the various significant systems involved: Metz (1974) and Cano (1999).

that he cannot go to the office because he feels ill, although he adds: "everything is under control" … as he tosses the phone and leans on the wall. In the lounge, Lisa and Sheldon see on TV the old woman who informs everybody of her son's life and miracles.

In the following sequence, he is back with the psychoanalyst and desperate, he confesses that the relationship with his fiancée is deteriorating because of the situation, to the point that the only solution that comes to mind is to commit suicide. As internal spectator, the psychoanalyst advises him to consult a psychic, a person who is in contact with the occult. Despite his scepticism, Sheldon goes to see the person recommended to him, the clairvoyant Treva Mars (Julie Kavner), the comic equivalent of the psychic Tiresias. Not by chance she is an eccentric young Jew who oddly greets him with the same words spoken at the beginning of the film by Sheldon's mother, "Have some more, you've only had a drumstick. Huh? You didn't have any potatoes pancakes at all … You still look thin to me." (Now the *heavenly* and loquacious mother seems to be right).

The clairvoyant, while possessing the gift of sight, does not see as the blind Tiresias did, runs a series *new age* tricks, each more absurd than the other. The attempts to recover the missing parent last for three weeks to end by recognising that the girl and her clairvoyant are a fraud and that she is a fake. Sitting on a sofa each of them regret their troubles. Despite the deception, both become friends and Sheldon, without having achieved his purpose, stays for dinner. The evening, which was first presented as a disaster, turns into a nice dinner in which the girl cooks the chicken in the same way the mother of the desperate protagonist used to cook. The similarities are not limited to food, as Treva treats her guest in a very similar way that the mother of the character used to: she prompts him to eat more, reminding him that he has not tried the potatoes, and pointing out he is very thin. In the end, the two have become friends and find it hard to say goodbye, but Lisa is waiting at their apartment. He leaves, but does so with the leftovers of the chicken that the false clairvoyant has wrapped in aluminium foil for breakfast. Sheldon leaves pensive and entering his apartment, he finds a letter from his fiancée in which she tells him that everything is over. However, the news of the break up doesn't sadden the character, who just throws the letter from his hand, while unwrapping the package of the dinner leftovers. It is a key point, because he looks now with rapture at the chicken thigh from which some jelly is hanging, smells it and ends up smiling. Without any mediating word, the audience listens to *All The Thing You are*: Sheldon-Oedipus is in love with the young woman and when this happens, as if by magic, a kind of cinematic chiasmus occurs.

As if it were a classical ring-composition, in the next scene the Jew who has changed his surname trying to flee his origin goes out onto the terrace of his mother's apartment accompanied by his new fiancée, the fake psychic. Now the mother gives her consent from the celestial heights and as if by magic, is sitting on the sofa, satisfied with the choice of her son. Just as the beginning of the film, she is showing the old pictures of Sheldon, but this time Treva, the *fiancée* occupies the space previously occupied by the parent. This time it is the young woman who wants to see the old pictures and, as the rude mother used to, commands silence when Sheldon protests and agrees with his mother. Here, in my opinion, lies the "wrecking" of the "cursed character" who, like Oedipus, but without Freudian overtones, falls into what he was trying to avoid: having a Jewish wife. The short film ends with a close up of Sheldon-Oedipus contemplating his fate between distressed and resigned.

It doesn't seem preposterous to claim that the confession of Woody Allen to Eric Lax on the idea of trying to deal with a "certain" theme hid the possessive relationship of Jewish mothers with their children. A television series which premiered in September 2007, the *Big Bang Theory*, completely matches this interpretation.[9] In this award-winning CBS sitcom, one of the main characters is a Jewish aerospace engineer, Howard Wollowitz (Simon Helberg), who despite being 30 years old still lives with his mother (Carol Ann Susi),[10] although he shows his displeasure by saying that she lives with him. The mother rarely appears on screen and they maintain a strange relationship: they talk loudly, insult each other, but are bound with a strange dependency, so strange that, once married, Wollowitz intends to continue living in his mother's house. The mother of another character, Leonard Hofstadler, Dr. Beverly Hofstadler (Christina Baranski), psychologist and neuroscientist, in the 15th episode of the second season, describes with scientific coolness this relationship as "sociological cliché." It is true that Wollowitz marries a young girl apparently antithetical to his mother: she is tiny and Catholic, but she "yells" exactly like his mother, moments in which, in the eyes of her husband, she is particularly "seductive." It seems, therefore, not unreasonable to argue that behind the Sheldon-Oedipus in Manhattan beats a reflection on Jewish mother – child relationships, the reason that led Woody Allen to assert that his film would cause a revolution in Israel, similar to that produced by *Gone with the Wind*, one of the most famous films in cinema history.

In conclusion, I return to the quote that has given rise to these pages: "Fate leads him who leaves himself to be driven and wins who does not …" It does not seem nonsense to assert that the Oedipus myth has allowed Woody Allen to deal with a thorny issue with his characteristically Jewish sense of humour. If we accept this reading, in the global context we live in, the "classic" Greco-Roman still has a unique quality that makes this knowledge essential to understand the elements

9. In this sense the study by Stora-Sandor (1984) is revealing.

10. It first appears on screen in the 24th episode of the seventh series.

of the contemporary civilization, especially in European tradition. As we look at "classic" not as a dead heritage, but as something deeply shocking and "strange" that must be conquered every day as a powerful stimulus to understand what looks "different", the more it will have to tell us in the future.

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Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic. Homer, Joyce and Bechdel

Classical reception and comic hybridization. The heroine explores her sexual identity

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This essay aims at analyzing the main classical sources of the graphic novel *Fun Home*, by Alison Bechdel, published in 2006, and their function in the construction of gender identity.

Keywords: comic, classical reception, hybridisation, sexual identity

1. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*: Some preliminary notes

Alison Bechdel, a Pennsylvanian, wrote this graphic novel in 2006. It narrates, in terms of an autobiography, the process of learning about her own homosexuality and how this circumstance affected her family relationships, especially with her father, who was a repressed (and tortured) homosexual.

Since its very publication, this graphic novel became a success, and it achieved a significant number of awards, as the Eisner award for the best biographical work, the Stonewall Book award, Lambda award and many others ones associated to the LGBT collective. Likewise, it made its appearance in lists enumerating the best books of the year in specialised literary magazines such as *Time*. It achieved the first place of the list and, it was also nominated for the Angoulême International Comic Festival award. Its popularity became a reality recently, in 2013, thanks to a musical adaptation entitled *Fun Home* with script and lyrics by Lisan Kron and music composed by Jeanine Tesori.

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This public and critical success indicates just to what extent this graphic novel has developed into a literary reference for the Western civilisation,[1] besides being a necessary model within the gay community.[2] The notable achievements that side this success are, on the one hand, the novelty of combining two genres that are not usually put together: biography and comic.

On the other hand, there is a profuse and pertinent use of cultural contents, which comprises quotes which allude somewhat to the literary arena.[3] The same happens with visual media (television, films and pictorial art) and the author's cultural background. Finally, another key to success is the chosen graphic style, consisting of black lines and fillings made in faded green and grey. This type of style is, in addition, spatially divided into two blocks. The first one corresponds to the characters, which are not drawn in great detail and occupy the foreground. The background is far much more elaborated: it comprises walls exhibiting posters, television sets showing programmes and the family mansion, which is drawn in Neo-Gothic style. This graphic fashion will make the viewer immediately identify the set design of the famous comedy series *The Addams Family*.[4]

This reference already offers a non-written piece of information, yet visual, about the high level of sharpness of the graphic novel: the Bechdel family members identify with the atypical characters of the Addams family, but in this case, their atypical nature lies on them being social misfits – they are freaks.

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1. About this, the critic I. Martín Rodrigo stated: "*Fun Home* should turn into a referential comic for the sake of Spanish graphic narrative. Its sincerity and the place in the world that the author (successfully) reclaims deserve it", (28th January 2009). "Fun Home. Una familia tragicómica." *ABC* <http://www.abc.es/20090128/cultura-literatura/home-familia- tragicomica-200901281559.html> [retrieved 30th November 2019].

2. Homosexual themes have invaded the comic world. Apart from Batman and Robin, classic homoerotic stereotypes whose sexual orientation went against the flow, powerful American comic-publishing houses such as DC and Marvel hurried to include homosexual characters, as Batwoman in DC in a lesbian version, or some other X-Men superheroes that are overtly gay or bisexual. With regards to this, Santi Valdés' *Los cómics gay* (1998) is indispensable.

3. <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fun_Home> [retrieved 30th November 2019]. The author of this web page has devoted a thorough gathering of all the literary references appearing in the work.

4. The author informs about this possibility on pp. 34, ≠2 and 35, ≠1 when, half joking, she suggests that "It was somewhere during those early years that I began confusing us with the Addams Family". At the beginning of the second chapter, she describes how their parents met and the development of this peculiar family which was created by two lonely artists: p. 134 ≠ 3. All the quotations from this work correspond with the US edition of the Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston-New York, 2006. There is an excellent Spanish translation by Rocío de la Maya, letterers María Eloy-García and Rocío de la Maya, Mondadori, Barcelona, 2008[6].

2. Plot

This graphic novel narrates the relationship between young Alison Bechdel and her father, who is a closet homosexual. The father was an English teacher and, besides, running a funeral home. In fact, the title of this work, due to a process of antiphrasis, became *fun home* for the children at home: Alison and her two siblings, to whom – together with her mother – Alison dedicated this piece of work. Incidentally, her father was keen on restoration of antiques and literature, which led the family to live in a Victorian mansion. There, appearances, opulence and Neo-Gothic elegance concealed a shameful reality for him. A distant father, who was also tortured because of his secret sexual preferences was, nevertheless, able to establish a strong emotional connection with his daughter Alison. She underwent with perplexity her father's strange temperament until the moment in which she entered university – where she learned she was a lesbian. She informed her parents about this piece of news with a letter, which she ended with a laconic yet unambiguous and incomplete – "m a lesbia" (p. 210, ≠4). Six months after this epistolary notification, Bruce Bechdel died run over by a lorry. Alison interpreted this accident as a suicide after his daughter's revelation, a natural, spontaneous, vivifying and sound revelation in opposition to the father's obscure, hypocritical, hurtful and non-self-accepted homosexuality.

The suspicion as to the father's death being a suicide hangs subtly over this comic. The reader feels that the creation of this piece of work is a sort of rendition of the burden of guilt that Alison carried with her due to her father's death: her own acceptance as a lesbian led her father to his downfall. He lived his own fictitious creation:[5] his marriage and his attempt at creating a family. He did not accept his true sexual orientation. Thus, he sublimated his homosexuality through literature and by daydreaming; he thought of himself as F. Scott Fitzgerald's alter ego especially thanks to the novel *The Great Gatsby* –,[6] which he debased due to paedophile behaviours. Lights and shadows were skilfully narrated through the point of view and lines of an adult woman who struggles to understand her own past. This is why she occasionally uses the diary of a girl who grew up in a constraining and lonely environment; a diary which makes clear tics and compulsions inflicted in her temperament because of that background.

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5. According to Tison (2007: 26), the life of Alison's father, based on appearances, can be described as an exercise of transvestism: a perfect husband and a family man who hides the secret of his homosexuality by becoming an expected social stereotype.

6. The author dedicates pages 62–64 and 84–86 to this author and his work, as they are key in the understanding of the father's temperament.

3. Comics and their classical reception

Comics and, more precisely, graphic novels have been considered from the very beginning a sub-literary product. In other words, they have been considered as a second-class creation that was emboldened more by its graphic effectiveness than by the narrated story and which were consigned to children or to not so demanding readers. It is a product that has been consumed by a large segment of the population, and it has been sold from their very creation in low-quality formats in news kiosks.[7] All those aspects prevented this type of work from being valued by the high culture or the intellectual elite of countries for decades, as happened with other pieces of low-brow culture creations such as pop music or detective novels. Important comic-book creators as Hugo Pratt (*Corto Maltese*), an Italian, Uderzo (*Asterix*), who is French, or the British Neil Gaiman (*Sandman*)[8] have been able to break down every single prejudice against comics and have turned them into what French people denominate “the ninth art” in view of the quality and originality of their works. This “ninth art” is a privileged convergence of two artistic manifestations, visual and literary ones. It is an artistic hybrid that explores another means of communication and that, given the results, is conspicuously effective and, at some point, successful.

The interest in these pieces of work has grown, and it has even reached the scholar arena[9] because of new research trends in comparative theory, such as Feminism or *Queer Theory*,[10] which are open to mass culture and to wonder in which terms low and high cultures influence and talk to each other. These works, alternatively diverse, fall under a definition with difficulty. This is demonstrated by its different denominations: *tebeo* in Spanish, *fumetto* in Italian, *bande dessinée* in French, *comic* in English and *manga* in Japanese, together with comic strips or graphic novels to define a book which includes pictures.

In this process of confluence, the culture of the elite inherited certain stereotypes originated during the Classical era, a complete set of aesthetics and a referential body of knowledge which were born in Greece and Rome. From the Renaissance to the Pirelli calendar by Karl Lagerfeld (2011), dedicated to the most androgynous Olympus,[11] the cultural elites have required the Western culture to

7. In English, they are called *cartoons* because, when they first appeared, they were drawn in coarse paper.

8. Cf. Unceta’s analysis from the point of view of the Classical world (2013).

9. About this, see footnote number 15.

10. See Tolmie (2009) and Watson (2008).

11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bv_aQvfFodw> [retrieved 30th November 2019]. This calendar is based on the idealised stereotype of gods in Greek pantheon; it is an ideal of beauty and androgyny, which is very much obliged to the German point of view about Greek art and its

define itself by means of Classical prototypes developed through the centuries (that is, a monumental and dissolute Rome, either historical or not, and also a cultured and sublimated Greece which is oblivious to other sources).[12] This requirement has been transferred to low-brow culture by process of contamination – yet not as a simple process of imitation. The subculture has assimilated and transformed the Classical world under other parameters and values. *Classical Reception Studies*[13] have helped to unveil this type of aesthetic revolution whose major achievement lies in the enquiry to the key points of the dialogue between the Classical past and the present,[14] and to bestow cultural validity to forms of mass consumption. Jesús Ferrero considered this class mark not so long ago when he stated that

> During the five centuries of the empire of the printing press, the bourgeoisie had been conceiving their philosophical and literary thinking. They published and sacralised a number of authors that, in fact, conform the history of literature in each country. This means that, naturally, the history of our literature has been following a class mark up to now. <http://elpais.com/elpais/2014/08/21/opinion/1408636901_ 032211.html> [retrieved 30th November 2019].

A fundamental step ahead in the analysis of the Classical world in the comic arena came with a collective volume edited by G. Kovacs & C. W. Marshall, *Classics and Comics*, that resulted in the acceptance of comics as a privileged receptacle of the Classical world – specially for the development of the superhero's role and for an untroubled rereading of Greek myths.[15] Or, as Jesús Ferrero says,

> And, in the meantime, which are the readings of the "low-brow"? They used to read and (currently) read authors that hardly ever appear in volumes related to the history of literature and that consume a type of narration that, for better or worse, is at the antipodes of the decomposition of the soul. It is a type of narration dedicated to cultivate, which displays an utterly heroic insistence that is not acquainted with faints, nor myths about supermen or superwomen.
> <http://elpais.com/elpais/2014/08/21/ opinion/1408636901_032211.html> [retrieved 30th November 2019].

almost asexual exaltation. Yet, the artist is able to transmit in every single picture a strong erotic content from this ideal.

12. Note the aesthetics imposed by Pre-Raphaelite artists. It provides a good description of that idealised Greece, in communion with nature, and which is full of knowledge (*Sappho and Alcaeus*), or the monumental and excessive Rome (*The Roses of Heliogabalus*).

13. With regards to this, see Martindale & Thomas (2006); and Hardwick (2008).

14. Cf. Unceta in this volume, "From Hero to Superhero".

15. A good example of what has been mentioned above is a comic entitled *Greek Street* by Peter Milligan; cf. Unceta's study (2012). Strip cartoonist Ralph König has dealt overtly with sexual orientation in his rereading of *Lysistrata*; cf. López Gregoris (2013).

The graphic novel *Fun Home* reveals itself, in a deep level, as a debtor of the Classical world, as well as of the meaning that this intertextuality provides by employing theoretical contributions as analytical tools.

4. Classical world in *Fun Home*

Now it is time to talk about *Fun Home*, an exceptional graphic novel.[16] This graphic novel, beyond its intrinsic interest as a literary and visual work as noted above, exerts a special attraction over the Classical world scholar due to an important fact: the insertion of a deluge of Graeco-Roman references, which are used as a background to build the literary and graphic structures of the narration. However, those references are far from being merely learned adornment only, as some of the chapters support the personal message that the author tries to convey. This message, at times, interpellates the reader in order to explain why literary references appear, whether Classical or not, when she says: "I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms" (p. 67, ≠1). Literature is indeed present in this graphic novel; this is so as it was present in the life of the author's father and of the author herself up to the point in which, according to her own words, "books were being read" (p. 61, ≠5) in that Victorian library.

Precisely two Classical references stand out from the rest and they turn into three different ones: the Daedalus and Icarus myth from Crete, Homer's *Odyssey* and J. Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is worth noting that the quotations are to be found mainly in two chapters, the first and the last ones, which are those dedicated to the figure of the father. Even the titles of the chapters allude to the father's heroic role. "Old father, old artificer," is the title of the first chapter, and it makes clear reference to Daedalus. For its part, the title of the second one is "The antihero's journey". It alludes subtly to the travelling of the Homeric hero, Odysseus, and the anti-hero, J. Joyce's Leonard Bloom.

Next, we will try to learn how the author employs these Classical myths to articulate the narrative-visual structure.

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16. The academic interest in this work has been captured in a conference held the 24th of January 2017 at the Institute Charles V/University of Paris 7, together with the François Rabelais University (or University of Tours). At this conference, there was a discussion on Bechdel's complete works, but paying special attention to *Fun Home*. The studies that were presented at this conference were published in *GRAAT*, a journal dealing with Cultural, Gender, and English studies (Cherbuliez, 2007, provides all the details about the conference).

4.1 The myth of Daedalus and Icarus

As noted above, this myth articulates the first chapters making a (more or less) explicit reference to it through terms such as "old" and "artificer" concerning Daedalus. The myth, not only on its narrative side but on its visual one as well, opens and closes the novel. The visual side can be found when remembering the passage in which Icarus fell into the sea when he approached the sun too much. This happened when he was trying a set of wings that his father, Daedalus, created. This mention occurs in a panel in which the father and the daughter play as if they were planes, here noted as "Icarian games"[17] (p. 3, ≠3) and referring to the dangers involved in the search for identity. In the end, it closes by means of a graphic evocation. In the last panel (p. 232, ≠2), the father holds the daughter when she intends to dive into the pool. The aerial metaphor describes accurately the figure of the father, here Icarus according to the author, in an inversion of the myth. He brought death voluntarily over himself, and it debunked the myth of the perfect father. Nevertheless, the last panel – in which the father appears holding the daughter – is a hopeful projection of a fatherly figure that by his "erotic truth" (p. 230, ≠1) and his literary presence led her daughter to the learning of her own sexual orientation. Both panels share an accomplished zenith angle, in which the author juxtaposes a mythical narrative with a vertical view to offer the reader the hero's fall vertigo (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Copyright © 2006. By Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission by Houghton Milffin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

17. In the first panel, the reader will observe a book on the rug and, in the third, it will be possible to read its title: *Anna Karenina*.

This optical illusion is one of the greatest achievements of the typical hybridisation found in comics, as it accomplishes an impossible effect in the narration which is fixed to the reader's imagination. Hence, the visualisation of the myths allows the reader to perceive and to feel through the graphic art different physical impressions which are not described in the text –in this case, vertigo or fear of the fall.

In relation to the Cretan myth, there is a disturbing mention to the Minotaur. The Minotaur is a hybrid creature, half man half animal, conceived as a result of the liaison of Pasiphaë and Poseidon's white bull, enclosed in a maze designed by Daedalus. It serves to describe the father's fits of rage: "My mother, my brothers, and I knew our way around well enough, but it was impossible to tell if the Minotaur lay beyond the next corner" (p. 21, ≠1). Once again, the image helps in the process of understanding the text that, in itself, does not clarify the situation: an enraged father gets up from the table and violently throws a plate against the floor to the family's amazement. Only the juxtaposition of the image and the Classical reference complete this information.

To conclude with this Classical reference, one can deduce that the Cretan myths help the author to create the image of a perfectionist, narcissist and maniac father (p. 7, ≠4).

4.2 The *Odyssey*

The presence of the *Odyssey*, always in the last of the chapters, is supported by some adventures that the hero, Odysseus, underwent: the Sirens, Circe, the Trojan Horse, Nausicaa, the descent to hell, Penelope, Scylla and Charybdis, Ithaca, Telemachus, etc. Actually, those allusions work as metaphors for some of the author's experiences and do not work as narrative text. This is so as they do not really help in the development of the action nor explain dubious situations; they are rather employed as paratext or learned quotations, or even containing exegetic keys that clarify the author's experience. The reader needs to learn this experience to understand its referential dimension.

Therefore, for instance, the author narrates how (p. 224, ≠2) she forgot a book at home just for the father to return it to the library. It was Kate Millet's *Flying*, a book that contains overtones which are overtly homosexual and is characterised by an honest and risqué style. Nevertheless, the father, drawn to the title of the book, decided to read it. The reading triggered the confession of his own homosexuality to her daughter in an elliptic way: it was done employing a letter and taking for granted that his daughter knew about his homosexuality. In the words of the author herself, "In an eloquent unconscious gesture, I had left *Flying* for him to return to the library – mirroring his Trojan-horse gift of Colette". Effectively, father and daughter try, at a very precise moment in their lives, to break the walls of their lack of communication and to conquer a revelation about their sexual identity. It is a strategy that can be very well defined as a "Trojan Horse". The episode about which the author refers is an enigmatic invitation made by the father (p. 205, ≠1, 2, 3) to read *Earthly Paradise*. This book is the autobiography of the French writer Colette, who became a symbol for the Parisian sexual liberation during the twenties. This type of interaction between sexual discovery and Homeric references constitutes a constant plot technique.[18]

Indeed, it can be stated that all the Classical references must be interpreted in terms of sexual identity, as this is the point of view that the author applies to Homer's *Odyssey*, a sexual-initiation journey[19] (p. 203, ≠2, 3): "The self-same afternoon that I realized in the campus bookstore, that I was a lesbian. Indeed, I embarked that day on an Odyssey which, consisting as it did in a gradual, episodic, and inevitable convergence with my abstracted father, was very nearly as epic as the original". This idea, the learning of her homosexuality and the identification with her father, is conceived under an epic and Homeric key. Therefore, each episode of this deed has its comparison in a character or episode in the *Odyssey* and, again, the image clarifies the meaning of the narrative: in the campus bookstore, the author leafs through books and this leads her to ascertain her sexual orientation theoretically. At the same time, she kept her gaze fixed on the English translation of the *Odyssey* published by Penguin, which is displayed in a distinguished place and showing a cover that, as we already supposed, corresponds with the original edition of the time in which the comic was inspired. On it, the reader will find Odysseus in a pensive mood, who is armed with a warrior spear, a chlamys and a pilleus or hat (203, ≠3) – exactly as the image that is displayed here (Figure 2).

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18. Although the father does not know about it yet, Alison collects readings on lesbianism that she denominates at times "siren songs" (p. 207, ≠4): "One *siren* led to another in an intertextual progression". It is necessary to have in the front of the reader the panel in which this collection of books on lesbianism appears in order to understand its intention and meaning; in the same fashion, it is necessary to look at the panel in which the young woman appears in the process of masturbation to understand the following Homeric quotation: (p. 207, ≠5): "I referred back to Colette, basking in her sensualism as perhaps the sea-ravaged Odysseus in the ministration of Nausicaa". This way, the young princess of Egeria's island – who was hospitable and gave shelter to the foreigner shipwrecked – is assimilated to the sensual pleasures that Colette offers to Alison.

19. Nevertheless, the Homeric poem must not be understood in terms of sexual identity in any chapter. There are no allusions to homosexual intercourses, bisexual behaviours, episodes related to transvestism, transgenderism or rituals. This is the case of the mythical story of Achilles in Skyros, whose transvestism strengthens his masculinity (Carlà-Uhink 2017: 12).

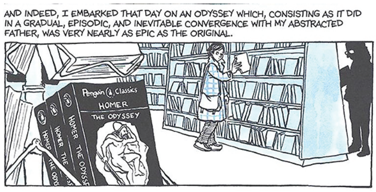

Figure 2. Copyright © 2006. By Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission by Houghton Milffin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

The allusive strength of the image, I.e., its value as paratextual or paravisual quotation with a great learned load is emphasised in the layout of that very panel. There, the reader is present at an interview between a lecturer in English literature that is preparing a seminar on *Ulysses* and the young author, who wants to attend it. It is made clear that this book is the father's favourite literary work. This coincidence is somewhat explained as a "form of divine intervention" (p. 202, ≠3). Then, Alison's reflection is materialised in these words: "Like the goddess Athena's visit to Telemachus, when she nudged him to go find his long-lost dad, Odysseus?" (p. 202, ≠4). Effectively, the first books in the *Odyssey* seem to conform an independent epic poem, the *Telemachy*. In those books, young Telemachus must leave Ithaca to survive – as his life was endangered by the suitors – and to look for his father. This last aim, which finds its correspondence in the author's vital quest, has been imposed by goddess Athena; she was father and son's protector, androgynous and a virgin as well. Up to that point, the quotation is but a skilful literary resource for learned readers who will be able to fully understand the needed parallelism between Telemachus' and Alison's quest. Still, in the next panel in which the lecturer and the student continue the interview, the background wall displays a picture entitled "The descent of Minerva" by John Flaxman. This picture will evoke to the expert in Classicism some famous engravings dating from the 18th century that Flaxman dedicated to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, conspicuous by the purity of lines and drawing. All in all, Alison Bechdel honours her colleague, her predecessor at work, in her own ways. Likewise, she refers to the Classical world. It is a learned reference that, excepting Classical philologists or History of Art scholars, goes unnoticed. The resemblance between the picture on the wall in the panel and the original by Flaxman is impressive.

There are more important references to the *Odyssey*,[20] but the so-called "Ithaca moment" (222, #4) by the author stands out due to its significance. This moment is something like recognition or re-encounters between Telemachus and Odysseus,

20. Other references are simply learned ones, as the lotus-eaters (p. 209, ≠ 3), being between Scylla and Charybdis (p. 213, ≠4), or to Helen and the Trojan War, which is in fact an allusion to the *Iliad* (p. 204, p. ≠5).

that is, between father and daughter. It is worth to stop for a moment and consider this episode, the "Ithaca moment". To narrate it quickly and effectively, the author changes the disposition of the page used until then (from three up to five panels per page) and chooses small panels occurring in series. She divides the page into 12 square panels distributed into two pages (pp. 220 and 221), which results in 24 panels including the same protagonists: daughter and father, who are focused in the forefront in a profile view when they are inside the car.[21] This redundant presence of drawings is in contrast with the laconic conversation between those two characters, whose speeches are differentiated by speech bubbles displaying a white background and a black line for the answers and the caption in a black background and white lines for the author's reflections. This is the case when she thinks that "It was not the sobbing, joyous reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus" (p. 221, ≠7).

With regards to the identification of her sexuality, there are two other key moments in the graphic novel that are described by a Homeric reference: the first contact with a gay organisation, described as the descent to Hades (pp. 209, 210) and the first sexual intercourse, compared to the episode of the Cyclops (pp. 214, 215).

"The descent into the underworld" (p. 209, ≠5), as the author defines it, is a "daunting test". This, nevertheless, soon departs the dark side and the terrible Classical stereotype once she opens its doors to light and kindness: "It was a benign and well-lit underworld, admittedly, but Odysseus sailing to Hades could not have felt more trepidation than I did entering that room" (p. 210, ≠1). Those two episodes share the fear of the unknown, yet the dead of the Homeric *katabasis* are replaced by merry and carefree youngsters of all types and orientations. The reader must note that even here the author pays tribute to the Classical world by drawing a poster hanging on the background wall. It is a representation of some Amazons riding horses which are identified with a demonstration for lesbian rights. This underworld is an efficient office crowded with noisy people.

The episode of the Cyclops displays a greater textual development and, for the first and only time, the reader will encounter a direct quotation from the *Odyssey*.[22] Also, the episode helps to create a metaphor for her lover's physical sex, Joan, which is assimilated to Polyphemus' cave. Once again against the Homeric tradition, the author does not want to escape as she finds her (sexual) identity here, in opposition to the Homeric model – in which Odysseus loses it. The height of the comparison of those two experiences is to be found when the author learns that Joan-Polyphemus has a glass eye. This eye does not make her more monstrous, but more of a human as

21. According to Muller (2007: 17), this balanced layout is a strategy related to the use of images to convey silence to the reader – something impossible to do by simply employing text.

22. "Being of colossal strength ferocity, to whom the law of man and god meant nothing" (p. 214, ≠1) seems to corresponds with the *Odyssey* IX, 214–215.

"She'd lost one eye in a childhood accident vividly reminiscent of the way Odysseus blinded Polyphemus" (p. 215, ≠2).

In this journey through the *Odyssey* as a copy of the learning of her sexual orientation and her filial quest, there is also a place for a somewhat quiet figure: Helen, mother and wife. In the seventh chapter, the author could not stop employing the equivalence between the abnegated and patient woman who underwent her husband's affairs resignedly and Penelope: "Like Odysseus's faithful Penelope, my mother had kept the household going for twenty years with a more or less absent husband" (p. 216, ≠4). Odysseus' adventures are easily assimilated to the husband's indiscretions: adventures, theft, traffic tickets, lies, outbursts of rage, etc., and the time references (twenty years) coincide with the actual time. Again, the panel completes the information of the Homeric hypotext when it shows a sombre woman, with a harsh look, sitting in front of a glass of wine and confessing her defeat. This is what Penelope means in this modern *Odyssey*: the defeat and frustration triggered by the wait. We will discover soon after that the abnegated wife will ask for divorce to the absent husband. The siblings, always present in the different panels, hardly ever have a leading role in any narrative episode,[23] none of them associated with Homeric or Classical adventures.

4.3 *Ulysses*

Joyce's literary work is mentioned several times, but always connected to the *Odyssey*; this way, on the one hand, it becomes a copy of the *Odyssey*. On the other hand, it turns into a counterpoint of the hero because, if the novel teaches something, is the sad wandering of an anti-hero, Leopold Bloom, the author's father avatar. *Ulysses* plays two different roles: it highlights Homeric quotes, and it pays tribute to her father. He preferred this literary work above any other, in a sort of mean identification with a replacement. This intimate connection between the two works is highlighted by the very author when she says: "Once you grasped that *Ulysses* was based on the *Odyssey*, was it really necessary to enumerate every last point of correspondence? Maybe so. Without the Homeric clues, it would certainly be unreadable" (p. 206, ≠4, 207, ≠1). Indeed, *Ulysses* should not be read unless one

23. The younger sibling, John, decided to go for a walk on his own when he was eleven. It was during a stay that the father and the siblings spent together in New York to celebrate the bicentenary of the city. He wanted to go to the dock on the Hudson to look at the ships (pp. 192 and 193). That area was notorious for being a meeting point for homosexual and paedophiles; in fact, the boy was approached by a young man who offered John to show him his boat. John managed to escape the young man and to go back to the flat where the family was staying. He reached the flat safely, yet scared.

reads Homer's poem before. In a sound inner logical sense, *Fun Home*. *A Family Tragicomic* must be read after the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*.

If the different references to the *Odyssey* support the two main aims of the author –the seek for the father and her sexual identity– the allusions to *Ulysses* have the purpose of reflecting on the issue of fatherhood: "Now if one of Joyce's themes is paternity, then why is the story about Stephen and Bloom, who are virtual strangers, and not about Stephen's actual, physical father?" (p. 206, ≠2). This begs for an answer and we will need to take it into consideration for the sake of understanding the personal history of the author. Alison's classmate answers the question diligently: "Bloom is Stephen's spiritual father" (p. 206, ≠2). Some pages later, after enumerating the difficulties in the publishing of *Ulysses*, which were the first publishing houses and how Joyce betrayed them to give the rights of the work to Random House for money, the author goes back to the issue of fatherhood and the position about it that Joyce supports in the book. What matters, he states, is spiritual fatherhood, not consanguineous fatherhood. Still, the author vindicates that, in her very case, those two roles were played by the same person, her father: "Is it so unusual for the two things to coincide?" (p. 231, ≠3). The same pattern appears in the *Odyssey*, in which Telemachus found and recovered Ulysses as father in every single aspect. In this crucial fact, Alison gets closer to the Homeric poem rather than to the modern novel. Still, we must clarify that it deals with a posthumous and intellectual recovery. The recovery of the father takes place after his death, once that his anti-heroism is understood and accepted, and thanks to the hard work of historical and personal memory.

Apart from fatherhood, Joyce's *Ulysses* offers a track of reflection about her father's lack of heroism – that is, about the inability to assume his homosexuality. If she herself is heroic and her continual model is the *Odyssey*, with all the avatars and the obstacles that the poem describes and life dictated, her father is the picture of an anti-hero and his model is *Ulysses*. In Stephen Dedalus' words, we will find a denial that, soon after, the father will make explicit. Stephen says: "**I am not a hero**, however". Alison's father confesses his anti-heroism in this way: "Helen just seems to be suggesting that you keep your options open. I tend to go along with that but probably for different reasons. Of course, it seems like a cop out. But then, who are cop outs for? Taking sides is ra~~h~~ther heroic, **and I am not a hero**" (p. 230, ≠3, 4). The author stresses this formal coincidence by transcribing one of the excerpts of the text just below the other one and making the sentence in question stand out with a white background and green letters (text of the father's letter),[24] and white background and black letters (quote from *Ulysses*).

24. In an attempt to provide the graphic novel with authenticity and, probably, emotional empathy, the author reproduces her father's letter including crossing-outs: *rahther*.

Therefore, if Joyce's *Ulysses* helps to narrate the anti-hero's (father's) journey, the *Odyssey* is used to describe the heroine's (daughter's) journey. The author regrets not having a valuable, moving and cathartic meeting between the two of them but, at least, they had an "Ithaca moment".

5. Conclusions

From this analysis, one can arrive at the following conclusions about the use of Classical references in this graphic novel:

- They perform a learned or cultivated paratextual function, both textually and visually.
- The references to Cretan myths open and close the story in visual terms, in relation to the father/daughter and hero's fall/redemption game.
- The allusions to the *Odyssey* help canalising two basic aims: the discovery of the sexual orientation – homosexual, in this case – as a heroic journey, and the seek for the father.
- The references to *Ulysses* act as an intermediary for the other two aspects: the strength of fatherhood – consanguineous as well – and the father's anti-heroic path in which he denies his homosexuality.
- The *Odyssey* is represented in a heroic attitude, the author's attitude;

Ulysses, for its part, represents an anti-heroic attitude, her father's attitude.

- The image, which contains drawings alluding to the Classical world, stresses Classical references sometimes, as in the case of Icarus' games, and broaden the information, as in the case of Flaxman's engraving.

To these specific conclusions about the use of Classical sources, a general (or methodological) conclusion about hybridisation, the transfer from high to low culture, must be made: graphic novels, which are designed to be mass-consumed, turn into highbrow graphic novels. This process takes place when the author encodes her ultimate disclosing in Western literary texts of paramount importance. The total number of those texts is so high that it is not possible to refer to all of them here. Among others, we could emphasise Homer's *Odyssey* or J. Joyce's *Ulysses*.

At the same time, visual information is also supported by high culture elements such as Flaxman's engraving or Neo-Gothic decorations that adorn the parental home. Those objects inform about the cultural level of the portrayed family whose rarity comes from different cultural usages. Maybe those usages are European and, hence, they are not shared by the American middle class.

To conclude, the use of the *Odyssey* as a model reflecting the seek for sexual and filial identity in this book works nowadays as a fixed and stereotyped model that deals with identity avatars –as *Ulysses* demonstrates. The *Odyssey* is an especially convenient referent, as it offers the quintessential heroic model inherited from the European school of thought, Odysseus, and compares his adventures to the ones of an ordinary citizen. This way, a young woman who looks for her father and her sexual identity becomes a heroine. At the same time, it leads us to understand that Odysseus' renowned adventures transform into the daily concerns of today's heroes and heroines. Another consequence of the employment of the Ancient World as hypotext of mass-consumed products is the trivialisation of the hero –and it is not an unimportant consequence. Hence, the concept of heroism has been redefined.

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Index

What was a hero in Classical Antiquity? Why is it that their characteristics have transcended chronological and cultural barriers while they are still role models in our days? How have their features changed to be embodied by comic superheroes and film? How is their essence vulgarized and turned into a mass consumption product? What has happened with their literary and artistic representation along centuries of elitist Western culture?

This book aims at posing these and other questions about heroes, allowing us to open a cultural reflection over the role of the classical world in the present, its meaning in mass media, and the capacity of the Greek and Roman civilizations to dialogue with the modern world. This dialogue offers a glimpse into modern cultural necessities and tendencies which can be seen in several aspects, such as the hero's vulnerability, the archetype's banalization, the possibility to extend the heroic essence to individuals in search of identities – vital as well as gender or class identities. In some products (videogames, heavy metal music) our research enables a deeper understanding of the hero's more obvious characteristics, such as their physical and moral strength.

All these tendencies – contemporary and consumable, contradictory with one another, yet vigorous above all – acquire visibility by means of a polyhedral vehicle which is rich in possibilities of rereading and reworking: the Greco-Roman hero. In such a virtual and postmodern world as the one we inhabit, it comes not without surprise that we still resort to an idea like the hero, which is as old as the West.

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