Classical Myth on Screen by Monica S. Cyrino & Meredith E. Safran (review)

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Chapter Four may seem like something of a logical outlier, given its focus on science fictional films – Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), Gareth Edwards's *Monsters* (2010), and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009), as well as a brief "coda" regarding Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013) – from three fictionalized, yet recognizable geopolitical contexts (Great Britain, the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S., and South Africa). Moreover, because all these films are set in a speculative near-future, their historicity is already somewhat unsteady, especially in comparison to the documentaries and features treated in the book's other chapters, most of which are composed of or based on testimonies by participants in and/or survivors of historical atrocities. Nevertheless, Chaudhuri maintains that these speculative fictions (and the digitized mutations of reality on which their *mises-en-scène* rely) invaluably expand the perspective from which their audiences perceive issues related to immigration, detention, and deportation: "Their SF worlds are constructed to invoke historical memories of past atrocities, which enable us to locate attitudes to refugees and other disadvantages migrants in a longer history of violence in which socially vulnerable people have been reduced to expendable non-persons" (116). Though her book largely predates the humanitarian crisis stemming from the ongoing civil war in Syria, many of the observations Chaudhuri makes in this chapter resonate strongly with that situation, which generally bolsters her assertions about this study's broader interpretive value.

Chaudhuri demonstrates a laudable command of contemporary geopolitics, film theory, and human rights discourse, but does not presume the same of her readers, and consequently provides substantial contextual discussion throughout the book. As a result, there is some minor repetition and even an occasional belaboring of a point, but none so severe as to detract from her articulation of what is generally a compelling case for interpreting a sizable body of contemporary films through an inherently ethical filter.

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Classical Myth on Screen. Monica S. Cyrino & Meredith E. Safran. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

It is no longer radical to suggest that mythology's new place in the cultural consciousness comes by way of the silver screen. *Hercules* (2014), *Immortals* (2011), and the *Clash of the Titans* remake series (2010, 2012) are just a few examples of the glut of modern takes on Greco-Roman myths. Instead, it becomes the duty and mission of editors Monica S. Cyrino and Meredith E. Safran, in their collected volume of essays *Classical Myth On Screen*, to explore what contemporary films' deviations from Homer and Ovid mean for the cultures for which the films were distributed. Though both editors are classics professors at esteemed institutions, they make it a point to separate *Classical Myth* from the majority of scholarship on mythological adaptation, which until now has mostly been concerned with "the representation of ancient history on screen" (5). Skirting the criticism more interested in preserving photo-realism and faithful cultural renderings of ancient Greek and Roman life, the editors err more on the side of treating the tradition of adaptation as more sacred than the original text being adapted.

The book's seventeen essays spread widely in both perspective and theory, ranging from feminist critiques of modern cinematic culture to meta-analysis of the role of film director as Homeric storyteller. No matter the disparity in subject matter, all chapters of the book conform to the premise, presented in the book's introduction, that *mythos* should be understood by its "functional" rather than "ontological" definition (2). Cyrino and Safran position *Classical Myth* as resolutely anti-

canonical with the assertion that any single "authentic" version of Homer or Ovid upheld by scholarship or society is a misguided one that forgets the pre-textual era of oral tradition (3). Withholding value judgments on any adaptation, no matter how contemporary and untested by time, becomes problematic only insofar as it is never challenged within the book by dissenting voices. In its desire for diverse but relevant conversation, *Classical Myth* is therefore best approached as a smorgasbord of various critical attitudes towards adaptation: a robust introductory course, but an introductory course nonetheless.

Despite the co-editors' preoccupations with cinematic departures from its ancient predecessors, "The Hero's Struggle," *Classical Myth's* opening section, is devoted exclusively to the similarities between Greco-Roman myths and the films fashioned, no matter how indirectly, after them. The first and fourth chapters of this section, Lisl Walsh's "'Italian Stallion*"* Meets Breaker of Horses*'"* and Seán Easton's "Orpheus in a Gray Flannel Suit: George Nolfi's *The Adjustment Bureau*," prove the standouts of the chapter for taking rather simplistic parallelisms between the film and myth subjects and re-contextualizing them for the post-World-War-II United States in which the films were distributed. For example, "Italian Stallion" studies the title character in light of the Achillean mythos, resulting in a reading of the film not as slavish servant to its Reagan-era patriotism but as a knowing agent of subversion to the same.

The second section, "Fashioning the Feminine," continues the above-mentioned chapters' interests in juxtaposing the ancient and modern understandings of the ancient's own mythology, only this time through the lens of gender studies. The first two chapters of "Feminine" address the archetype of the Amazonian woman. The authors of these chapters often cover similar territory, but Cyrino and Safran wisely pair the two because of their split resolutions on the potential good or ill cinema's manipulations do for social discourse. A fine companion chapter, "Magic, Music, Race," comes in the third section of the book, "Negotiating The Cosmic Divide," with co-editor Monica Cyrino offering a brief walk through the history of the "magical" black man in cinema (123). Like the chapters on the Amazonian, "Magic" is primarily concerned with destabilizing the staid sacredness often attributed to mythological archetypes. All three chapters also expose culture's collective attitude toward the Other, be it gender or race, during the exampled periods in history. In tune with the spirit of the book, Cyrino's own chapter displays most prominently the fluidity of adaptation, always conforming itself to new standards of society.

The "Cosmic Divide" section argues for film and television effectively creating "the modern conceptualization of ancient divinities from mortal perspectives" (8). Meredith Safran's "Re-conceiving Hercules" and Vincent Tomasso's "The Twilight of Olympus" in particular show how the divinity logic of Homer's time is no longer fit for a culture, in the contemporary West, which emphasizes the Christian symbols of resurrection and incarnation at the expense of the aggressive, inhumane personalities of Homeric immortals. It's no surprise that Cyrino and Safran contribute their own chapters to this section, for the theme promoted is most explicitly in line with the project of the introduction: the validation of any cinematic adaptation from mythological texts as representing its own rightful mythos.

To avoid misunderstandings about the limits of such validation, the latter half of "Cosmic Divide" makes a proper distinction between an art form's right to adapt long-held sacred books and the implications such an adaptation may have on the ideology of its society. "Re-conceiving Hercules" and "Twilight of Olympus" are treated as "pessimistic views" not of adaptation, but rather of the projected attitudes and ideologies "of the pagan gods in contemporary viewing contexts" (9). Implied is pessimism about the contemporary

audience's own insular, Judeo-Christian anxieties. Similar reservations surface in "Cinemyth-Making," the book's fourth and final section. "Hypatia and Brian" by Anise K. Strong plays on the fears and anxieties of the prototypical modern Westerner by exposing collective disgust over satirical adaptations of the Old and New Testaments as closed-minded prejudice. Like "Fashioning the Feminine," Strong and the other authors in "Cinemyth-Making" find the Other not in a gender or race-based archetype but in the artifice of the sacrilegious or heretical text. This archetype, too, bends and stiffens at the command of its ideological times, though not always in the context of religious allegiances. Consider "Dionysus Comes to Gotham: Forces of Disorder in *The Dark Knight*," where David Bullen believes the 2008 filmic incarnation of Batman to be as dependent on the canon of the titular character's own history and mythology as it is on Euripidean story structure. Bullen implies a future of superhero film adaptations that choose 20th century comic books for direct source material instead of ancient plays and poems. Cyrino and Safrans' experiment is taken to its furthest limits with the argument that the future of film carries with it the possibility of creating its own timeless mythologies. Understandably, this is why "Divine Animation," a reading of 1981's *Clash of the Titans'* director Ray Harryhausen as a Homeric god in his own right, ends the book. The chapter swims in its own ocean of filmic references. *Classical Myth* goes most meta-, indeed, when leaving behind the world and terminology of Homer, Ovid, and Euripides. As the rhetoric of Dan Curley's "Divine Animation" suggests, the world of cinematic mythology has its own terminology, and is surprisingly self-sustainable in this present age.

As a whole, *Classical Myth* plays best to the undergraduate student or beginning scholar with interests either in film or the classics. For advanced scholars of adaptation theory and practice, much of the book's content will prove remedial, especially given the relative brevity of each chapter; depth is often sacrificed for a larger range of talking points. Just as the book is an introduction of sorts to the subject of adaptation, so too are the individual chapters introductions to the ideas they bring forth. Nevertheless, Cyrino and Safran have put together a well-informed collaboration that looks optimistically toward the future of film adaptation while remaining ever aware of the magnitude of the history it leaves behind.

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Agnès Varda. Conway, Kelley. Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2015.

To undertake a new book length study of Agnès Varda is surely a daunting task. The filmmaker has been hard at work for over 60 years, having preceded (and partially inspired) the French *nouvelle vague*, embraced multiple formats for her creative work – moving from fiction, to documentary, to installation art, and every permutation in between – and, perhaps most intimidating for academics, having already inspired a wide range of scholarship, including two monographs (one as recent as 2014), a significant section of Sandy Flitterman-Lewis' *To Desire Differently*, and a stuffed-to-the-brim dossier of book chapters and journal articles over the years. Thankfully, the latest study of Varda has been expertly undertaken by Kelley Conway, who provides great insight into Varda's films, methods, historical context, and personality through unprecedented access to the Ciné-Tamaris archives and the legend herself. A lucid survey of Varda's life and work, Conway's *Agnès Varda* brings readers as close to the real Agnès Varda as seems possible in a scholarly work .

Conway's monograph appears as the latest in University of Illinois Press' Contemporary Film Directors series dedicated