Introduction: The god of light and the cinema eye

To the ancient Greeks and Romans Apollo was the patron of arts and sciences like music, poetry, medicine, and prophecy. Apollo also came to be the god of light, literally in his identification with the sun and figuratively as bringer of culture and enlightenment.[1] His most common epithet attests to his essence: *Phoibos* or *Phoebus* ("Shining, Brilliant"). The word expressed the god's nature so well that the ancients came to regard it as practically a second name. As representative of civilization Apollo was also the *Mousagetês*, the leader of the nine Muses, his half-sisters who were themselves guardians of arts and sciences. Apollo's half-sister Athena – Minerva to the Romans – was associated with culture and the arts as well.

Apollo is the first god to make a personal appearance in the history of classical literature. At the opening of Homer's *Iliad* he brings a devastating plague upon the camp of the Greeks by means of his far-reaching arrows. The first Homeric epithet for Apollo is therefore *hekêbolos*: "hitting his mark" but subsequently understood to mean "hitting from afar."[2] Related to this word is another adjective frequently found in Homer and later authors to characterize Apollo: *hekaergos* – "working from afar."[3]

For the purpose of the present book the meaning of this latter term will be understood beyond the range that was open to the ancients. The reach of

[1] Apollo has been attested as god of light since the fifth century BC: Aeschylus, *Suppliants* 213–214 and Fragm. 83 Mette (from the lost play *The Bassarids*, in which the singer Orpheus worships Helios-Apollo and rejects Dionysus); Euripides, *Phaethon* 224–226 (in Fragm. 781 Kannicht). The great *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* already indicates the association of Apollo and the sun. Cahn 1950: 198 note 65 lists additional sources. The identification of Apollo with the sun extends through Greek and Roman antiquity and is regularly attested. Overviews of the variety of Apollonian myths and images in antiquity may be found in standard books on Greek myth and, with greater detail, in Graf 2009 and Solomon 1994. For Apollo's importance in the later Western tradition, especially in the Renaissance, cf., e.g., Seznec 1953 and Bull 2005: 301–343 and 418–419 (notes). The works here listed are valuable starting points and provide additional references.

[2] Homer, *Iliad* 1.14.

[3] It appears for the first time at Homer, *Iliad* 1.147. The etymological meaning of *hekê- or heka-* seems to have been different from what it came to mean in association with *hekathen* ("from afar").

Apollo as god of light exceeds that of Apollo the archer. In antiquity the rays of the sun could be captured and focused only to a limited degree – if very effectively, as Archimedes demonstrated to the Romans with spectacular success in 212 BC during the siege of Syracuse.[4] Now, however, the light of the sun can be combined with other kinds of light. It can be preserved on film or digitally, and it can be exhibited, either unchanged or after technical manipulation, by means of a projector or comparable device onto a screen or monitor. Consequently, from a modern quasi-mythological perspective Apollo may be linked to the new light that makes cinema possible. The shining god now takes on another important function and becomes the patron of the art of painting with light. Our term *photography* means "light-writing," while *cinematography* is "movement-writing" (and strictly speaking should be *photocinematography*: "light-movement-writing"). The cinema is a modern Apollonian art form, the most important heir of painting, sculpture, and literature. D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), one of the most famous and influential epic films of the silent era, was advertised as "A Sun-Play of the Ages." Film theaters and production or distribution companies frequently feature the god's name.[5] We may even apply another ancient Greek term to Apollo which expresses, quite literally, this new area of his responsibilities. This word is *phôtokinêtês*: "light mover." It refers to both of the crucial features that make film possible: the light, without which the camera could not record anything and without which the projector or

[4] Archimedes was killed during the Romans' capture of the city. Epic cinema has paid tribute to his invention of giant convex mirrors to focus the rays of the sun onto the Roman fleet only twice: in an episode of Giovanni Pastrone's epoch-making *Cabiria* (1914) and in the almost entirely fanciful plot of Pietro Francisci's *Siege of Syracuse* (1960). Howard Hawks's sophisticated comedy *Ball of Fire* (1941), co-written by Billy Wilder, contains a clever and witty tribute to Archimedes at its climax.

[5] *ApolloMedia* is a German film and television production company; the two l's in its name are in the shape of abstract Ionic columns. Various production and technical companies have been called *Apollo Film*. (A large one is now operating in Poland.) *Apollo Cinema* is the name of a Los Angeles-based distribution company; *Apollo Cinemas* are a large theater chain in Great Britain. ("Apollo" is a standard name for film theaters.) A "supreme motion picture" is being advertised as playing "at the Apollo Theatre" in Harold Lloyd's silent comedy *Speedy* (1928). In Agostino Ferrente's *The Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio* (2006) the eponymous musicians endeavor to save the Apollo on Rome's Esquiline, one of Italy's oldest and most attractive theaters, from being turned into a bingo parlor after it already suffered the indignity of being a venue for pornographic films. The *Apollo Film Festival* regularly takes place in the Apollo Theatre in Victoria West, South Africa. An *Atelier Apollo* had been established in Finland in 1889. The protagonist of Brian de Palma's political-conspiracy thriller *Blow Out* (1981) works for a sleazy film production company in a seedy part of Philadelphia; appropriately for the film's context but regrettably for lovers of antiquity, the company's offices are above an Apollo theater that shows only hardcore pornography. The electronic *Apollo Movie Guide* (www.apolloguide.com) promises "intelligent reviews online." (The level of this intelligence varies.) *Apollo* is also the name of a line of projection screens. *Delos-Film*, a minor German production company that released a few romantic melodramas and comedies in the mid-1950s, had a stylized Ionic column for its logo. The island of Delos is Apollo's birthplace.

monitor could not show anything, and the motion that distinguishes film as a series of moving images from static ones. In Greek director Theodoros Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995) Apollo has indeed become the god of cinema, as we will see in Chapter 2. Angelopoulos regards the classical god of light as the spiritual guardian of the most powerful modern medium of art and communication. Apollo's ties to cinema had, however, been established much earlier through his function as *Mousagetês*. French poet, painter, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau repeatedly hailed the cinema as a new Muse: "FILM, the new Muse"; "the Muse of Cinema, whom the nine sisters have accepted into their close and strict circle"; and: "The Muse of Cinema is the youngest of all Muses."[6] Early French cinema even had a star who paid specific tribute to these classical ladies: actress and later screenwriter, producer, and director Jeanne Roques assumed the name Musidora ("Muses' Gift"). She became immortal to film buffs as Irma Vep in Louis Feuillade's crime serial *Les vampires* (1915) and as the screen's first vamp. The god who leads the Muses is even better known. Actress Barbara Apollonia Chalupiec (spellings vary) became one of the silent screen's greatest stars as Pola Negri. Her name is doubly appropriate: "Pola" from Apollo, "Negri" after Italian poetess Ada Negri.

It is a fitting serendipity that the name of the French founding fathers of film should have meant *Light*. The brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière began making short films lasting about fifty to fifty-two seconds in 1895.[7] A modern scholar comments:

> Photography, as its name implies, is inscription by light, light that the camera receives from its subjects and retains in its pictures. And out of light the film image is twice made: light inscribes the image in the camera and light projects the image

[6] Quoted from Cocteau 1992: 23, 123, and 56 (with slight corrections). That ancient poets invoked their Muse for inspiration is well-known; Homer, *Iliad* 1.1 and *Odyssey* 1.1, and Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.8, are the most famous instances. Ahl and Roisman 1996: 27 point out the pre-eminence of the Muse even over the poet: "As the *Odyssey* opens, the poet asks the Muse . . . to sing in him . . . Once the appeal is completed, the Muse's voice takes over, we are invited to believe. The poet, who appears to know the story he is prompting the Muse to recite through him, vanishes from view and does not intervene again." So, at least in traditional cinematic storytelling, the film's creator may seem to retreat in comparable fashion behind the narrative on the screen, which unfolds as if by superhuman power or magic. (Cf. my quotations from André Bazin in connection with Cocteau's *Orphée* in Chapter 6.) That there still *is* such a creator, though, I argue in detail in Chapter 1.

[7] A number of the Lumière brothers' "actualities" from 1895 to 1897 are collected on the DVD *The Lumière Brothers' First Films*. A useful anthology of very early films, including the Lumières', is on the five-DVD set *The Movies Begin: A Treasury of Early Cinema, 1894–1913*. Louis Lumière's famous verdict that the cinema has no future and no business potential whatever is one of the most endearing misjudgments ever made, especially poignant for coming from one of the fathers of the new medium.

on the screen . . . Lumière's original movie camera doubled as a movie projector: light went into the machine and light came out.[8]

The light of cinema, discovered, harnessed, and presented by the Lumière brothers and their successors, instigated a profound change in Western culture – from reading stories to viewing stories, from literature to image, from linguistic text to cinematic text. As much as this was a radical break with the past, it was also a continuation of the entire tradition of human civilization. I address this topic in greater detail in Chapter 1, but it is appropriate here to quote a knowledgeable if rather rhapsodic witness who testifies to this continuity. French film pioneer Abel Gance had begun writing and acting in films in 1909 and had directed his first film in 1911. He published an article with the prophetic title "The Time of the Image Has Come" in 1927, the year that also saw the release of his six-hour historical epic *Napoleon*. In his encomium to cinema Gance wrote:

> In truth, the Time of the Image has come!
> All the legends, all mythology and all the myths, all founders of religion and all religions themselves, all the great figures of history, all objective gleams of people's imaginations over millennia – all of them await their resurrection to light, and the heroes jostle each other at our gates in order to enter . . . and it is not just a Hugoesque [i.e. flippant] joke to think that Homer would have published there [i.e chosen the new medium for] the *Iliad* or, perhaps even better, the *Odyssey*.
> The Time of the Image has come!
> . . .
> Look well! Adorable blue shadows are playing on the figure of Sigalion: they are the Muses, who are dancing around him and celebrating him, vying with each other.
> The Time of the Image has come![9]

With his references to myths and to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the very beginnings of Western literature, Gance was not simply bragging about the cinema or showing off his classical erudition but rather pointing to an ongoing development in the creative arts from antiquity to his own day. His conjuring up of Sigalion and the Muses makes the point more vivid.

[8] Perez 1998: 336.

[9] Quoted, in my translation, from Gance 1927: 96 and 98. For background information about this essay see King 1984: 61. King 1984: 62–79, reprints excerpts in translation of Gance 1929 (as "The Cinema of Tomorrow"), which incorporates material from the earlier essay, including the main part of the first passage quoted here (cf. King 1984: 78). Throughout the 1927 essay, Gance repeats its title phrase in an incantatory manner, thereby not only stating his argument as emphatically as possible but also revealing his love for the still young medium. Who could resist him when he exclaims in the same article: "Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films"?

Sigalion is the ancient god of silence.[10] Gance names him as a reminder that films at his time are silent, if with the exceptions of the intertitles that provide narration and dialogue and of the music regularly accompanying the screenings.

An ancient Greek novelist with a highly developed sense of the visual corroborates Gance's perspective when he emphasized the visual (and aural) attractions that stories held for ancient listeners or readers. Heliodorus, probably writing around 360 AD, includes a moment in *An Ethiopian Story* when Kalasiris, one of the novel's major characters, recounts his adventures to Knemon, a curious young man. He mentions the ritual procession which he had witnessed at Delphi, Apollo's sanctuary, as part of the Pythian Games held in the god's honor. Kalasiris omits details of the festival from his account since they are not important, but Knemon interferes:

> "When the procession and the rest of the ceremony of propitiation had come to an end – "
>
> "Excuse me, Father," interrupted Knemon, "but they have not come to an end at all. You have not yet described them so that I can see them for myself. Your story has me in its power, body and soul, and I cannot wait to have the pageant pass before my very eyes. Yet you hurry past without a second thought."

On Knemon's insistence Kalasiris describes the festivities and mentions a hymn that he heard sung. When he neglects to quote from it, Knemon again insists on being told more:

> "For a second time, Father, you are trying to cheat me of the best part of the story by not giving me all the details of the hymn. It is as if you had only given me a view of the procession, without my being able to hear anything."[11]

Kalasiris is forced to yield; he quotes part of the hymn and describes its musical performance. The words Heliodorus puts in Knemon's mouth are revealing. Knemon sees and hears in his mind a story he is being told only verbally, as expressions like "see for myself," "before my very eyes," and "a view of the procession" indicate. This is how all readers mentally imagine what they read. Roughly a century before Heliodorus, Lucian of Samosata had made this point in a comparison of the work of the historian and that of the sculptor:

[10] See Ausonius, *Epistles* 29.26–28.

[11] Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Story* 3.1–3. Both excerpts are taken from the translation by J. R. Morgan in Reardon 1989: 349–588; quotations at 409 and 410. I have examined Heliodorus' novel in Winkler 2000–2001, with references to earlier scholarship on Heliodorus' visual narrative style.

> The historian, we may say, should be like Phidias, Praxiteles, Alcamenes, or any great sculptor . . . When . . . a hearer [we might add: or a reader] feels as though he were looking at what is being told him, and expresses his approval, then our historical Phidias's work has reached perfection, and received its appropriate reward.[12]

What Heliodorus tells us about Knemon's psychological fascination with the visual and aural sides of narrative applies to other forms of storytelling as well. In the cinema we see and hear literally and not, as in Knemon's case, only with our mind's eyes and ears. But our imagination is as strongly engaged as Knemon wants to be involved in Kalasiris' account. Modern terminology like *imagination* (from Latin *imago*, "image"), *fantasy* (from Greek *phainesthai*, "to appear"), *idea* (Greek for "mental picture, perception," from *idein*, "to see"), and *aesthetics* (from Greek *aisthanesthai*, "to perceive visually") all attest to the highly visual nature of understanding, to visual and mental ways of perception. Our expression "I see what you mean" expresses the same idea. What Knemon sees and hears while listening to Kalasiris are moving images and sequences of sound – after all, Kalasiris is describing to him something in motion, a procession. Greeks and Romans could not *make* motion pictures, but they could *imagine* them by visualizing motion in progress. In the first century BC the Roman poet Lucretius described just such a thing. His lines about visions that come to us in our dreams today reads like an ancient account of cinema – the "dream factory," as it is often called – with its forms and figures succeeding each other through dissolves or cuts:

> it is not wonderful that images move
> And sway their arms and other limbs in rhythm –
> For the image does seem to do this in our sleep.
> The fact is that when the first one perishes
> And a new one is born and takes its place,
> The former seems to have changed its attitude.
> All this of course takes place extremely swiftly,
> So great is the velocity and so great the store
> Of them, so great the quantity of atoms
> In any single moment of sensation
> Always available to keep up the supply . . .
> And what when we see in dreams the images
> Moving in time and swaying supple limbs,
> Swinging one supple arm after the other

[12] Lucian, *How to Write History* 51; quoted from *The Way to Write History* in Fowler and Fowler 1905: 109–136; quotation at 132.

In fluid gestures and repeating the movement
Foot meeting foot, as eyes direct? Ah, steeped in art,
Well trained the wandering images must be
That in the night have learned such games to play! . . .
It sometimes happens also that the image
Which follows is of a different kind: a woman
Seems in our grasp to have become a man.
And different shapes and different ages follow.
But sleep and oblivion cause us not to wonder.[13]

The film camera records fixed images at such a rapid pace that they can be projected onto a screen in a manner that makes them appear to be moving. Earlier, the photographer's still camera, reproducing what was put before it in usually black-and-white images and with absolute fidelity, had irreversibly changed the way modern man saw the world. But the camera did not present a completely new way of seeing. That had occurred in the Renaissance, when artists prominently turned to perspective in drawing and painting. Critic John Berger comments:

> Today we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before. We actually perceive it in a different way.
>
> This difference can be illustrated in terms of what was thought of as perspective. The convention of perspective, which is unique to European art . . . , centres everything on the eye of the beholder. It is like a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light travelling outwards, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances *reality*. Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges on to the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God.
>
> According to the convention of perspective there is no visual reciprocity . . . The inherent contradiction in perspective was that it structured all images of reality to address a single spectator who, unlike God, could only be in one place at a time.[14]

Berger is correct in his observation that perspective is unique to European art, but he might have pointed out that its origins are ancient, a fact not as widely known as it deserves to be. The earliest perspectival paintings were the architectural representations on the backdrop of the Athenian stage, the *skênographia* that had been introduced by Sophocles in the fifth century BC. The first painter of perspectival *skênographia* is said to have

[13] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 4.768–776, 788–793, and 818–822; quoted from Melville 1997: 122–124.

[14] Berger 1972: 16; with typography slightly altered, as also in the following quotations.

been Agatharchus.[15] The camera is both new as an advanced technical instrument and traditional in its reproduction of perspective and in the artistic composition of images that perspective demands. The film camera is the best means to put before our eyes realistic-looking images that tell stories and are at the same time artistic compositions.

The perspective in a painting or photograph, at which a viewer is gazing from a distance, literally by being placed at some remove from the image itself and figuratively by being completely removed from the scene being presented, prepares the way for a quasi-divine perspective that is to come with images that move and tell stories. The film camera can show us everything either subjectively from the point of view of characters or (apparently) objectively. It may be detached from individual characters or from the story, appearing to be omniscient as from God's – or a god's – superior position. Hence the recourse in films to the device of the omniscient narrator, who serves a function parallel to that of the divinely positioned camera. The perspective in painting and still photography prepares us for the power of perspective in motion pictures, which also work through a single-eyed gaze. But since film images move, the quasi-divine power to change the place of looking by means of camera movements, dissolves, and cuts introduces a new element, that of time passing. About the still camera as an intermediate stage between painted and moving images Berger goes on to observe:

> After the invention of the camera this contradiction gradually became apparent. The camera isolated momentary appearances and in so doing destroyed the idea that images were timeless . . . the camera showed that the notion of time passing was inseparable from the experience of the visual (except in paintings). What you saw depended upon where you were when. What you saw was relative to your position in time and space. It was no longer possible to imagine everything converging on the human eye as on the vanishing point of infinity . . . Every drawing or painting that used perspective proposed to the spectator that he was the unique centre of the world. The camera – and more particularly the movie camera – demonstrated that there was no centre.
>
> The invention of the camera changed the way men saw. The visible came to mean something different to them.[16]

In 1928 Abel Gance had already commented on the novelty of moving images and their impact on people's ways of perception:

[15] Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 7 Preface 11, attributes the discovery of fifth-century painting in perspective to Agatharchus, a somewhat problematical dating. Pollitt 1974: 236–247, collects and discusses the ancient sources on *skênographia* and gives further references. See especially White 1956 and Richter 1970b.

[16] Berger 1972: 17–18.

> The most familiar objects have to be seen as if for the first time, producing a transmutation of all our values. This transformation of our way of looking, in an absolutely new domain unfamiliar to our senses, is in my opinion the most wonderful of modern miracles.[17]

The technical, artistic, and psychological impact on traditional ways of seeing that arrived with the film camera led to the kind of exuberance that we can observe in Gance's words and in early filmmaking. The gleeful trickery to be found at the beginning of cinema, for instance in the films of Georges Méliès, is the best example. But the intellectual and artistic challenges that the cinema brought with it had been expressed a few years before Gance's enthusiasm for his medium in an even more ecstatic hymn to cinema and the technical potential of the camera, the essential tool to capture and project light and to inspire the filmmaker's creativity. Russian writer, director, editor, and theoretician Dziga Vertov wrote in 1923:

> The main and essential thing is:
>
> The sensory exploration of the world through film.
>
> We therefore take as the point of departure the use of the camera as a kino-eye, more perfect than the human eye, for the exploration of the chaos of visual phenomena that fills space.
>
> The kino-eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye . . .
>
> I am kino-eye, I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people in accordance with preliminary blueprints and diagrams of different kinds . . .
>
> I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.
>
> Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies. Now I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant, maneuvering in the chaos of movement, recording movement, starting with movements composed of the most complex combinations . . .
>
> My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you.[18]

Vertov's views of cinema are exemplified in his masterpiece, *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929).[19] This film shows the reality of the cinema eye

[17] Gance 1928: 197–209; quoted from the translation by King 1984: 56.

[18] Quoted from Vertov 1984: 14–15 and 17–18. *Kino* is Russian for *cinema*. Berger 1972: 17 quotes parts of this text in a different translation.

[19] For an analytic introduction to this seminal film see Roberts 2000. On Vertov and the cinema eye see now also Hicks 2007, with updated bibliography. Master cinematographer Nestor Almendros pays tribute to Vertov with the title of his autobiography (Almendros 1984).

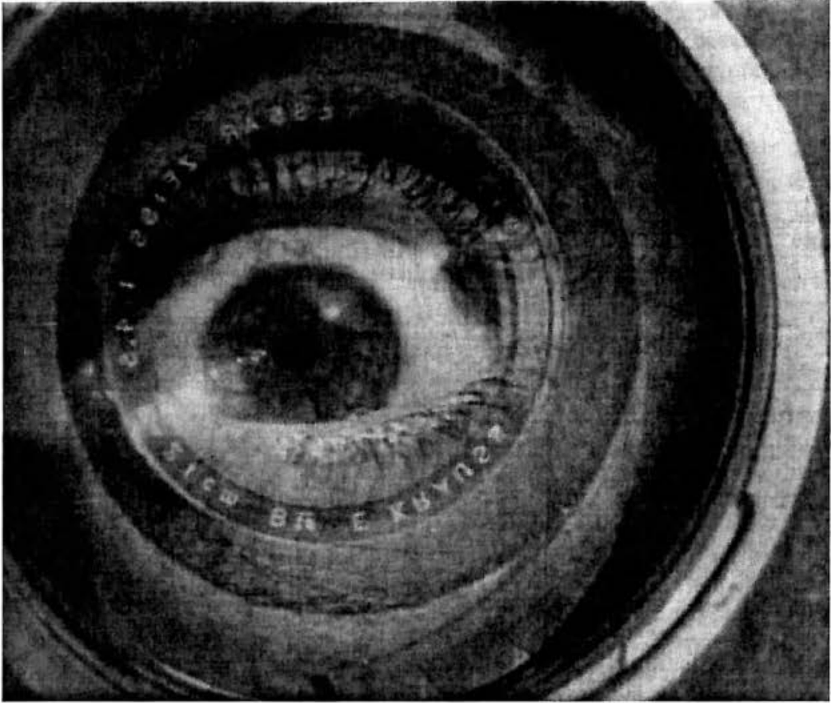

Fig. 1. *The Man with the Movie Camera.* Dziga Vertov's Cinema Eye, the film's final image. (VUFKU-Image)

in a famous image when a camera lens appears superimposed on a close-up of a human eye; it is impossible to separate the one from the other (Fig. 1). Decades later director Federico Fellini was to observe: "the camera is just my eye."[20] In 1924 Vertov made a series of four documentaries which he titled *Kino Glas*: "Cinema Eye." The sensory exploration of the world that Vertov mentions is the chief purview of art, as it has always been. In antiquity such exploration was often but not always divided: either word or image, but not both simultaneously – except in the theater, which combined the visual and the verbal. Our word *theater* comes from the Greek *theatron* ("viewing space") and is based on the verb *theân* ("to see" or "look at"); our term *drama* is a Greek noun and derives from *drân* ("to do," "act"), a reference to the actors' movements on stage. (Latin *actor* literally means "doer.") The chief modern viewing space for actions is the cinema with its theater (and now home theater). It combines the visual

[20] Quoted from Stevens 2006: 638.

and the verbal arts into one, incorporating yet others like music, song, and dance – all forms of expression that were crucial for the development of archaic and classical Greek culture.[21] The cinema provides artists with the ultimate means to achieve a previously elusive goal, the presentation or representation of the world of human experience in a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a creation that encompasses all the arts.

Decades after Abel Gance wrote the words quoted above, a distinguished classical scholar confirmed that the time of the image has come. J. B. Hainsworth observes about the time of Homer, the change from oral to written storytelling, that "at the beginning of literature, when heroic poetry reached society as a whole . . . society *listened*; in the twentieth century society *views*." In between listening and viewing, society has been reading. For better or worse, society's viewing now seems to edge out society's reading. Hainsworth further comments that "the modern heroic medium is film, and not necessarily the productions that are held in highest critical regard."[22]

Among the productions that are not generally held in high regard are western films. The western is the one genre of cinema that comes closest to expressing the essence of classical myth.[23] One specific moment in a well-known western epic illustrates Hainsworth's point, for we view (and hear) how stories or myths used to originate when society listened. In John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) a hero-worshiping youngster, who himself aspires to heroic stature and will eventually be accepted into the titular group, comments on the exploits of its leader after a day of fighting: "You know what? They'll make up a song about you . . . villagers like this, they'll make up a song about every big thing that happens, sing 'em for years." Here the cinema recalls the pre-literate age when epic songs were performed orally by singers or bards. The Homeric epics, which combine features of the oral tradition of composition and performance with the beginnings of literacy, are our greatest examples of this stage of storytelling. Homer, the father of Western literature, is also the godfather of film. His Odysseus has inhabited the land of cinema since 1905, when Georges Méliès made *L'île de Calypso: Ulysse et le géant Polyphème*. The title of this film, abbreviated to *Ulysses and the Giant Polyphemus* in English, carries an archetypal meaning. Its three proper names point to the nature of popular narrative: a beautiful woman of supernatural allure is in love with a handsome and clever hero who is himself the vanquisher of a savage

[21] We may note in passing that the Italian term for a film studio's "sound stage" is *teatro*.

[22] Hainsworth 1991: 148. [23] I have addressed this topic in Winkler 1985 and 1996.

monster. The birth of cinema reincarnates Homeric epic. Or, to look at it from the opposite perspective: Homeric epic, chiefly the *Odyssey*, is the precursor of a new technological medium of storytelling in images, just as it had provided the impulse for a new art form in the seventeenth century. Claudio Monteverdi's and Giacomo Badoaro's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* came near the birth of opera in 1640.

Hainsworth's point about the variable nature of epic cinema is important. It indicates that the traditional disdain that literary and classical scholars used to evince for the cinema has become anachronistic. But it is worth recalling what that attitude was like. No less a figure than Gilbert Highet of Columbia University, a widely read (in both senses of the term) scholar and a dedicated teacher and propagator of classical culture in and beyond the academy, could write in 1949 in his best-known and most frequently reprinted book:

> The difference between an educated man and an uneducated man is that the uneducated man lives only for the moment, reading his newspaper and watching the latest moving-picture, while the educated man lives in a far wider present, that vital eternity in which the psalms of David and the plays of Shakespeare, the epistles of Paul and the dialogues of Plato, speak with the same charm and power that made them immortal the instant they were written.

Yet Highet was aware, if condescendingly, that the cinema was not solely of and for the uneducated. In his chapter on Renaissance drama he commented, if only in a note buried at the end of his long book:

> It has been interesting to watch the gradual self-education of the films (largely through experiment, but to a considerable extent also by tutelage from the stage and by criticism) from the early crudity when they produced nothing but farces, serial melodramas, and spectacles, towards something like a real understanding of the power of drama.[24]

Echoes of Highet's position toward cinema survive. Five and a half decades later Charles Martindale, a scholar well-known for openness toward modern critical approaches to antiquity, wrote in his introduction to a collection of scholarly essays on the reception of classical literature, art, and culture:

> I fear . . . that, if we abandon a serious commitment to the value of the texts we choose for our attention and those [*sic*] of our students, we may end by trivializing reception within the discipline; already a classics student is far more likely to spend time analysing *Gladiator* than the *Commedia* of Dante. I find this trend worrying. This is not to decry the study of a wide range of cultural artefacts (there

[24] The quotations are from Highet 1949: 545 and 598 note 3.

are many more good things in the world than the canon knows), and certainly not to criticize the study of film or even of popular culture. It is simply to say that we form ourselves by the company that we keep, and that in general material of high quality is better company for our intellects and hearts than the banal or the quotidian (often we use the latter, archly and somewhat cheaply, merely to celebrate our own cultural superiority). We need to believe in the value of what we do, and whatever we do we need to do it in full seriousness, not in any spirit of cynicism or condescension.[25]

Disingenuity is palpable in these lines, which despite protestation to the contrary archly reveal (celebrate?) the writer's own superiority. The adverb "even" that accompanies Martindale's reference to popular culture is the giveaway. Martindale appears not to apply to himself his exhortation to others, for if he did why should he be afraid of *Gladiator*? And is it an expression of a spirit of condescension that this film, which Martindale had mentioned on his second page, does not rate an entry in the book's index, just as the cinema as a whole is conspicuous by its absence from almost the entire volume?[26]

In their different ways across half a century, Highet's and Martindale's words, taken together with all the other quotations given above, are my justification for the present book. It presents thematically related essays on the affinities between classical and cinematic narratives. The book interprets films as visual "texts" that are capable of the close analysis that classical philologists are trained to carry out. I call this *classical film philology*, an important new branch on the venerable tree of traditional classical scholarship that addresses the links between texts and images. As none other than Johann Wolfgang Goethe had emphasized in 1816, "philology without an understanding of the [visual] arts is only one-eyed."[27] Chapter 1 lays the foundation for this kind of endeavor from specific theoretical and historical points of view. Obviously, several other approaches to film, to film and literature, and to classics and cinema are possible. These exist alongside and complement mine, but they are not my subject here. Instead I have set myself the task to develop, for the first time, a system that combines a reaffirmation of classical philology and the study of ancient literature,

[25] Martindale 2006: 11.

[26] Exceptions are a mention in passing of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990) and a brief discussion of Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004) at Martindale and Thomas 2006: 31 and 190.

[27] Goethe wrote this in a letter dated January 15, 1816. He specifically referred to the new study of ancient art as revolutionized by Johann Joachim Winckelmann. The original sentence reads: "Seit Winckelmanns und seiner Nachfolger Bemühungen ist Philologie ohne Kunstbegriff nur einäugig." Shortly after, Goethe adds that the different branches of scholarship advance each other ("so fördern die verschiedenen Zweige der Wissenschaften einander"). My quotations are taken from Goethe 1902: 221.

culture, and history for their own sake and in their own right with an exhortation to integrate film into such work. A perspective like this enables us to view the ancients as important and even fundamental contributors to an ever-evolving and never-ending cultural continuity. Diachronic study necessitates considerations of new aspects, in our case of a technology that did not yet exist in antiquity but whose roots go back to a pre-technological past. André Bazin, one of the most influential critics and theoreticians of film, explicitly made this point in 1946:

> The cinema is an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed, so to speak, fully armed in their minds, as if in some Platonic heaven, and what strikes us most of all is the obstinate resistance of matter to ideas rather than of any help offered by techniques to the imagination of the researchers.

Bazin illustrates this observation with an analogy from Greek myth: "the myth of [Daedalus and] Icarus had to wait for the internal combustion engine before descending from the Platonic heavens. But it had dwelt in the soul of every man since he first thought about birds."[28]

Subsequent chapters apply the perspective proposed in Chapter 1 to specific representative cases of ancient literary and modern visual texts. Chapter 2 addresses filmic portrayals of the divine, exemplified by Apollo, the patron god of cinema, and the Muses. Chapter 3 deals with Oedipus, antiquity's most influential mythic-tragic hero and a figure directly connected to Apollo by means of the Delphic oracle. Through Sigmund Freud, his modern champion, as it were, Oedipus is also crucial for the nature of cinema, as we will see in the same chapter. Chapter 4 starts with Horace's famous if controversial line that it is "sweet and fitting to die for your country" and discusses heroism and patriotism. This, the most serious topic in the book, is of special significance in the present age of imperial warfare. To emphasize the importance and the unbroken tradition of the theme of individual heroism and glibly invoked patriotism I examine in this chapter a considerable amount of modern literature in conjunction with ancient literature and film; in this way I hope to make evident how important the cinema is for our culture and how closely it is connected to the classical tradition. Like the Muses discussed in Chapter 2, women as objects or products of male desires and fantasies are the topic of Chapters 5 and 6. A brief epilogue returns us to Homer and Apollo. The book as a whole has something to say about the variability and adaptability of ancient literature and myth, the nature of creativity and commercialism

[28] Bazin 1967a: 17 and 22, slightly altered and corrected.

in the progression from texts to images, the persistence of antiquity in a global society that is becoming increasingly unfamiliar with and even alienated from its classical origins, and the dual importance of the study of antiquity for its own worth and for its importance today, not least in view of its wide dissemination in our mass media. By examining the filmic reconstructions of and variations on certain fundamental ancient themes the book hopes to contribute something to our understanding of ourselves. Its individual topics are meant to be regarded as representatives of other related and interrelated themes and approaches that are wider than those encountered here.

One aspect of modern representations of classical themes that the book deals with repeatedly deserves a brief theoretical consideration at the outset. Most of the ancient stories and figures that will be examined are taken from myth, so the films that recreate or adapt them are also mythic, if in their own ways. In antiquity the concept of myth was fluid enough to accommodate a wide range of divergent, even contradictory, versions of the same story. This tradition continues in modern times: myths, whether ancient or later, preserve their Protean nature. Classical antiquity has always played a major part in film history, but screenwriters and directors as a rule take extensive liberties with their source materials. Archetypal figures recur with almost infinite changes in films based on Greek and Roman literature, especially epic and tragedy, and in films with invented historical, pseudo-historical, or modern settings. The same concept applies to other subjects, for instance history.[29] What film scholar Pierre Sorlin has deduced about historical films applies equally to literary and mythical subjects, as my parenthetical additions to his words here quoted will make evident:

> An historical film [or a film based on a work of literature] can be puzzling for a scholar: everything that he considers history [or important for the plot and style in a literary work] is ignored; everything he sees on the screen is, in his opinion, pure imagination. But at the same time it is important to examine the difference between history [or the scholarly study of literature] as it is written by the specialist and history [or the original text] as it is received by the non-specialist.

Sorlin sees the most important aspect of historical film in "the use of historical understanding in the life of a society" – that is to say, in the society that makes such films.[30] The same goes for literary adaptations, which

[29] Regarding films set in classical antiquity cf. Winkler 2004a: 16–24 (section entitled "Film and Historical Authenticity").

[30] Both quotations are from Sorlin 1980: ix.

illuminate the life of the society that produces them. So the conclusion becomes unavoidable that, as far as cinematic recreations of times past are concerned either in historical settings or in literary adaptations, scholars' understandable demands for authenticity are beside the point.[31] They fail to take into account the nature of film as a narrative medium which needs creative freedom in order to tell its stories. For this reason the cinema cannot be solely or chiefly indebted to or dependent on principles of historical or philological authenticity. This observation is not meant to denigrate historical accuracy or literary faithfulness in a visual adaptation. On the contrary, concern for authenticity in the recreation of the past is a sign that creative artists such as directors, screenwriters, set decorators, or costume designers take their task seriously. But correctness in the representation of the past is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to assure the quality of the result.

In the area of mythology the tradition of imagining alternatives to well-attested and even canonical versions of myth goes back to antiquity itself. Our surviving texts reveal that different or mutually exclusive variants of certain parts or individual moments in a myth existed in antiquity, and we have visual evidence of myths or versions of a myth that are unattested in any text – a kind of visual equivalent to textual *hapax legomena*, words occurring only once in our surviving literature. It is therefore difficult, not to say impossible, to maintain that certain accounts of a myth are the correct ones and that others are false. Alternative versions used to circulate far and wide throughout ancient literature and the visual arts, as the works of playwrights, mythographers, and epic and lyrical poets on the one hand and those of sculptors and painters on the other attest.[32] This tradition has continued uninterrupted. Today, in an age of advanced technology, myths can be told or retold chiefly or entirely in images, moving ones at that. Cinema and its offspring, television, have proven fertile grounds for re-imagining and re-inventing stories from classical antiquity. Film and television are now followed by video and computer games with often sophisticated levels of "interactivity." Italian director Vittorio Cottafavi, who made several cinema and television films set in Greece and Rome, aptly described his and his fellow filmmakers' approach to their subject matter as "neo-mythologism."[33] Chapters 2, 3, and 5 in particular demonstrate the validity of film-philological examinations of such neo-mythologism.

[31] Cf. Solomon 2006. Bertelli 1995 examines errors in a large variety of historical films.

[32] A case in point are the ancient portrayals of Odysseus as hero in epic and as villain in tragedy. Stanford 1954 is the classic account.

[33] On Cottafavi and his term "neo-mythologism" see Leprohon 1972: 174–179. Cf. further Winkler 2007b.

The present book interprets several if by no means all possible approaches to ancient subjects that filmmakers can adopt. More than any other means of creative and commercial expression, film as a narrative medium encompasses all the ranges of high and low culture. My own preferences – if not, I hope, prejudices (except very occasionally) – will quickly become apparent, although I have taken pains not to let them color my arguments. While the films I examine differ considerably in their artistic qualities, they all present in their own and sometimes unique ways noteworthy examples of the continuing vitality of the classical past in today's culture. At the same time it is worth remembering that classical and biblical antiquity has always conferred social acceptability and cultural prestige on a new medium whose origins and early history made it suspect to most of the members of good society.[34] An anecdote from the silent days of cinema that is as amusing as it is charming illustrates this fact. British film pioneer Cecil Hepworth recounts the following story from his days as presenter of film shows:

> I was giving my lecture once in a large hall built underneath a chapel. My apparatus was set up as usual in the heart of the audience, and while I was waiting beside it for the hour to strike when I was to begin, the dear old parson came and sat down beside me. He said he was quite sure that my entertainment was everything that it ought to be, but he knew I would understand that, as shepherd of his little flock, it was his duty to make doubly certain and would I let him see my list of pictures. So I handed him the list and watched him mentally ticking off each item until he came to the pick of the whole bunch, a hand-coloured film of Loie Fuller in her famous serpentine dance. He said at once that he could not allow that – a vulgar music-hall actress. I said rather indignantly that there was nothing vulgar about it; that it was indeed a really beautiful and artistic production, but he was adamant and insisted that it must be omitted. Then I had to begin. Apart from my reluctance to leave out my best picture, I was faced with the practical difficulty of how to do it. For this was the last picture but one on the spool. There was no earthly means of getting rid of it except by running it through in darkness, and I didn't think the little flock would stand for that. Then, just as I came to the danger-point, I had a sudden brainwave. I announced the film as "Salome Dancing before Herod". Everyone was delighted. Especially the parson. He said in his nice little speech afterwards that he thought it was a particularly happy idea to introduce a little touch of Bible history into an otherwise wholly secular entertainment.
>
> And he added that he had no idea that the cheenimartograph had been invented so long![35]

[34] I examine a specific case and refer to related examples in Winkler 2007a.

[35] Hepworth 1948; quoted from *The Penguin Film Review* 1977–1978, vol. 2: 33–39, at 38–39. Hepworth was himself a filmmaker and writer on cinema; as early as in 1897 he published *Animated Photography: The ABC of the Cinematograph* (cf. Hepworth 1900). On then famous dancer Loie Fuller see Current and Current 1997.

Antiquity and the cinema are inseparable, and their interactions today ought to be part of anybody's assessment of modern culture. But if antiquity is important for cinema, cinema is also important for antiquity and the presence of classical Greece and Rome in our culture and education.

While it is true that the ancients did not actually know the "cheenimartograph," it is equally true that the idea of progressive storytelling, if in static images, was anything but alien to them. And their verbal narratives exhibited a variety of what we would now call filmic techniques as we already saw in Lucretius.[36] So the cinematic nature of much of ancient art and literature is itself sufficient justification for classical scholars to engage in research and teaching of film in connection with their work on the Greeks and Romans. The present book, written by someone who has been equally in thrall to the nine ancient Muses and the tenth cinematic Muse for many years, is intended to give classical scholars interested in similar endeavors a theoretical foundation and a number of practical examples to broaden the reach of their field beyond its established boundaries. But the book addresses a considerably wider audience: those who work in film studies, comparative literature, cultural studies, European and American history and culture, and related fields in the humanities and social sciences. Far from being meant for academics only, the book also hopes to reach readers who love both antiquity and the cinema – amateurs in the literal and best sense of the term. For this reason my book requires no expert knowledge of either antiquity or film. I have avoided all specialized terminology, which in academic circles tends to degenerate into jargon so obscure as to be unhelpful to all except true believers. Specific vocabulary is accompanied by explanations except when familiarity may be taken for granted. All passages from the classical languages are quoted in translation, as are those from modern sources that were originally published in languages other than English. The book provides extensive references to recent and current scholarship on all topics covered for those interested in finding out more.

Although I point to the cinema's almost limitless possibilities to adopt and adapt classical literature, my book is not and cannot be exhaustive in demonstrating the variety of ties between ancient literature, art, thought, and history on the one hand and film on the other. No single author could undertake such an endeavor, not even in a series of

[36] I discuss examples of these aspects of Greek and Roman culture in Winkler 2000–2001, 2001b: 11–14, and Winkler 2006b: 48–63. For other examples see especially Newman 2001 and Mench 2001.

books.[37] But I hope that readers will take the very absence of a particular topic, figure, film, or literary work which they would have liked to see included as an incentive to pursue their own lines of enquiry, to take my chapters as starting points for further professional work on or private pursuit of cinematic variations of classical themes. They are also welcome to take issue with my arguments or conclusions. Intellectual engagement between writers and readers is at the heart of literature, and the same goes for films and their viewers. This principle applies to classical film philology in equal measure. If my discussions send readers back to particular films or classical works, if they encourage them to read a text or to view a film again or for the first time, this book will have achieved its goal.

[37] Particularly desirable, to mention just one instance, is a systematic overview of the connections between ancient philosophy, both in general and in regard to ancient views of the visual arts as forms of representation (*mimesis*), on the one hand and the philosophy of film on the other, with emphasis on the ontological and phenomenological aspects of cinema. If modern philosophers can fruitfully turn to cinema – I mention, as only one prominent example, Deleuze 1986 and 1989 – why not also scholars of ancient philosophy?

CINEMA AND CLASSICAL TEXTS

Apollo's New Light

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