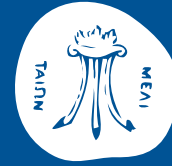


# THE MCA NEWSLETTER



Malta  
Classics  
Association

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## LETTER From the Editor

Χαίρετε!

This year, the Malta Classics Association is celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Looking back at the various events and projects that the MCA has run over the years and through its newsletter archives, I feel lucky to be part of an association that is so passionate and enthusiastic about a subject that I hold dear.

As the new editor of the MCA newsletter, I feel it is my duty to not only uphold the quality and professionalism of the previous issues, but also to improve it. Consequently, I have redesigned the look of the newsletter, and we will be including a wider range of articles and illustrations in subsequent issues. And since no man is an island, I encourage you, the reader, to contact us if there is something you would like included in the newsletter, or if you have a project or event that we can share with the Classics community. Just send us an email on [info@classicsmalta.org](mailto:info@classicsmalta.org) or contact us on our Facebook page.

*Elizabeth Kemp*

# A Night at the Cinema

Dr Carmel Serracino

Let me repeat what I have often said before: I owe my fascination for the ancient world to film, in particular to *Le Fatiche di Ercole*, a low-budget mythological film released in 1958. The film was so successful that it spawned a new cinematic genre known as *peplum* (from πέπλος, 'a robe').

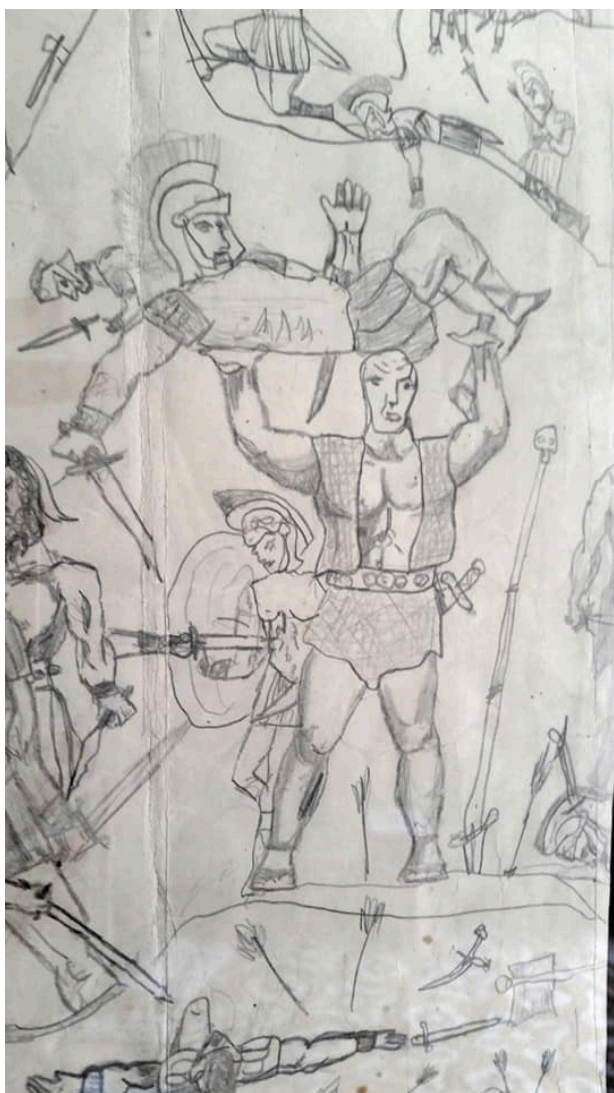
The *pepla* were low-budget action films set in Ancient Greece or Rome, aimed primarily at a young male audience. The typical plot-line followed the exploits of a hero, often played by a bodybuilder 'actor', who performs a series of extraordinary feats of brawn or endurance so as to finally crush the cruel tyrant – or the mad emperor if the setting happened to be a Roman one. Among the dangers besetting the hero's progress was usually a beautiful but vicious *femme fatale* who all but succeeds in luring him away from the right track, and the right girl.

When I was a schoolboy of about six years old, around 1978, *Le Fatiche di Ercole* was reissued at the local cinema and my father took me to watch it. From the first scene, in which the hero Hercules, played by 'Mr. Universe' Steve Reeves, uproots a huge tree and hurls it in the path of a pair of frenzied chariot-horses in order to save their beautiful damsel charioteer, I was hooked to the silver screen and, as a result, to the world of ancient myth and heroes.



*Le Fatiche di Ercole*, 1958

After that memorable initiation at the Rialto Cinema in Cospicua, I watched many other *pepla* screened on Italian TV (most of them had been Italian productions)<sup>1</sup>. Those films would furnish me with inspiration for my childhood games and drawings. Today, still a film aficionado, I can barely watch any of the *peplum* films to the end: they are not exactly what one would call ‘great cinema’. Nevertheless, I am hugely indebted to *Le Fatiche di Ercole* for enthralling me with the power of myth for the rest of my life (despite containing what the purist classicist would probably disparage as several mythological inaccuracies) and for paving the way to my eventual professional career in Classics.



A detail from ‘The battle between Spartacus and the Romans’, a drawing in pencil I made in 1981 when I was about 9 years old.

## Film and Classics Reception

In the last decades, the academic field of Classics has grown and developed impressively. Classics today is not restricted to the study of ancient Greece and Rome, their languages, texts, history, and archaeology. Classics today also embraces the study of ‘reception’ - the study of how modern cultures and societies received, appropriated, and made use of antiquity for their own ends.

Film is one of the forms of pop culture studied by scholars working in ‘classical reception’. I was only a few months into my postgrad in Classics when I discovered that classicists working in reception would actually consider *Le Fatiche di Ercole* and other *pepla* as material worthy of serious attention and study. This discovery was for me something of a spiritual revelation – which does not make it any less extraordinary that, some forty years after that fateful night at the cinema, I can legitimately speak about the impact of that film in an academic environment, even using one of its publicity stills to advertise the course *Classics and the Cinema* (LAS 2001) that I conduct for the Programme in the Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Malta. It seems that I have managed to turn a childhood fantasy into an adult teaching tool!



### Classics and the Cinema

Coordinator: Mr Carmel Serracino

Film has become an important source of analysis and discovery for the student of classics. Cinema's recreation of the ancient world can tell us something about ways by which modern culture perceives the Greek and Roman past. Moreover, what film-makers choose to have us glimpse of the past reveals a lot about what we want to watch onscreen, reflecting modern-day cultures, ideologies, and social concerns. This Unit will investigate cinematic attitudes and representations of the classical world in the light of authenticity, metaphor and other agendas, discussing a range of films starting from the silent epic *Intolerance* (1916), to Hollywood's *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *Ben Hur* (1959) to the 60s. The Unit will finally examine the recent surge of films depicting antiquity.

### Programme in the Liberal Arts and Sciences

Quality | Opportunity | Flexibility

[um.edu.mt/clas](http://um.edu.mt/clas)



<sup>1</sup> Most of these films can nowadays be enjoyed on YouTube and other online video-sharing platforms.



## Teaching Classics through film

That film can be used as a pedagogic tool has been recognised from the very early days of cinema. The pioneer filmmaker and director of some of the greatest silent films, D. W. Griffith, was one of the first to underline its potential: film, he observed, is “a powerful mode of historical writing which could better transmit an historical consciousness to the public than months of study”.<sup>2</sup>

*Classics and the Cinema* has given me the opportunity to experience this first-hand. I approached the first edition of the course as a systematic and chronological overview of key films set in the ancient world, from the silent epics such as *Cabiria* and Griffith’s own *Intolerance* to the Hollywood Roman blockbusters such as *Quo Vadis* and *Ben-Hur*, digressing awhile into the auteur ventures of *Fellini Satyricon* and *Edipo Re*, and winding up with the revival of the big-budget ancient spectacular heralded by *Gladiator* – without omitting due reference to the charms of the *pepla*.

By the second run of the course, however, I came to realise that this could be an opportunity for doing more than showing and talking over scenes from ancient films, and that films (and not necessarily classically-themed ones) could actually serve to introduce some of the major questions pertaining to Classics and the way the world engages with Classics.

By the third run, specific ancient films became the basis for the discussion of such questions as:

- ❖ What is/are Classics? Is there a difference between *classic* and *Classics*?
- ❖ Why should the classical world be interesting to the non-scholar?
- ❖ How authentic and comprehensive is our knowledge of the ancient world?
- ❖ What makes some ancient personalities (Cleopatra, Spartacus) more ‘film-worthy’ than others (Achilles, Cicero)?
- ❖ Is it justifiable to tamper with an ancient myth or historical episode for personal or artistic ends?
- ❖ What is the interaction between contemporary politics and our understanding of the ancient world?
- ❖ *Et multa alia...*

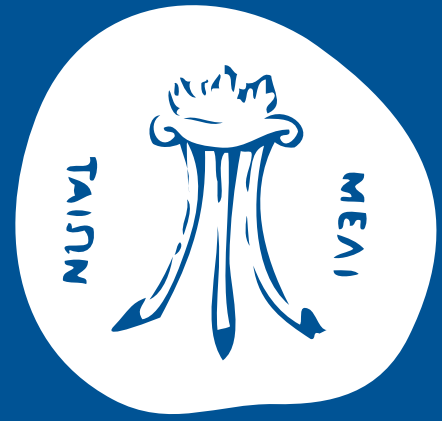
During Semester I of next academic year, I shall be conducting, *Deo volente*, another run of ‘Classics and the Cinema’, during which I hope to continue exploring the potential of cinema as an exciting means to introduce the many sides, questions, and enticements of Classics.



The Azure Window still in glorious splendour: a scene from *Clash of the Titans* (1981) a mythology film shot in Malta, with obvious debts to the *pepla* film.

<sup>2</sup> M. Wyke (1997) *Projecting the past: Ancient Rome, cinema, and history*, Routledge, p. 9.

# the power of the CLASSICAL WORD



## theatre

*noun //*

**An indoor hall or outdoor space most commonly used for dramatic performances**

**From the Classical Greek θεάομαι (theaomai) meaning 'to gaze' and θέατρον (theatron) meaning 'theatre'.**

## agriculture

*noun //*

The skill of nurturing soil and crops, as well as raising animals in a farm.

From the Latin *ager* meaning 'field' and *cultura* meaning 'cultivation'.

## perilous

*adjective //*

Describes something involving much danger, usually involving risk of death.

From the Latin *spericulosus* meaning 'dangerous' or 'hazardous'.

## synthesis

*noun //*

**A combination of ideas to form a complete whole, used often, but not exclusively, in Philosophy.**

**From the Classical Greek σύν (syn) meaning 'with' and τίθημι (tithemi) meaning 'to place'.**

## category

*noun //*

**A set of individuals, objects, or concepts which share certain similar features.**

**From the Classical Greek κατά (kata) meaning 'down' and ἀγοράομαι meaning 'to speak publicly'.**

## province

*noun //*

A part of an empire, under a governor who responds to the central government.

From the Latin *provincia* meaning 'command' or 'administration'.





# THE CLASSICS: Forward Progress Made Backwards

Andrew Debono Cauchi

From the age of 14, I nurtured a great fascination for the deep root of humanity – that binding common factor which shaped us from the commencement of our existence to the humans we have become today. It is my personal quest to seek and explore this anthropocentric ‘theory of everything’, believing it to be essential in determining the right direction for contemporary human progress.

My first stop on this quest was Music, the medium which I found dissolves boundaries of age and culture. Then I turned to Mathematics which liberates itself from the chains of time with its distinct universal logical approach. This in turn led me to Philosophy, the mother of every human thought herself, and then to the Classics. But are the Classics merely another stepping-stone on this everlasting quest, or could they be the final destination? I have come to think that the answer is the latter rather than the former.

In today’s world, we seem to have lost the full picture of humanity, fragmenting the individual self into many parts. Frequently, the commitments on our endless day-to-day schedules are distinct from each other and with no correlation whatsoever i.e. they do not always contribute to an overall more holistic self. The knowledge we gain is specialised with each study having its own specifically developed terminology. Intellectual communities seem to evolve around common aims and interests rather than on interdisciplinary principles.

The Classics are entirely counter to this. Greek and Roman philosophies are structured whereby beliefs and practices are built from the most fundamental beliefs outwards, such that each idea and every sphere of human life contributes to an all-rounded human self. For example, Plato believed that our world is made

of different sensory representations from his world of Forms, the 'ideal' world conceptually above ours. He thus views art as a representation of a representation of a Form, and thus as not of epistemological worth.

This is an example of how philosophical beliefs are structured outwardly starting from the existence and interaction of objects in the world to their status and role in our life, rather than by consideration of these two dynamics randomly and without correlation. For me, the Classics are primarily a way of building bridges between the various aspects of human life, bridges through which the Greeks and Romans seemed to traverse so swiftly. This structural system is also reflected in the Classical languages themselves, namely Greek and Latin.

These languages intrinsically have two faces, one scientific and the other artistic. Consider the following lexical set in Greek: στρατιά (stratia), στρατηγός (strategos), στρατηγία (strategia), στρατεύω (strateuo), στρατηγῶ (stratego). In English, the meaning of each of these words is: 'an army', 'a general', 'a strategy', 'to serve as a soldier' and 'to be a general' respectively. We may note that although in the English translation of the lexical set the root of each word varies, the root in the Greek form, στρατ (strat), remains constant. It is by this inherent economic principle that in the Classical languages, one common root is typically sufficient to derive multiple terms in the same conceptual region. Just like Mathematics, the Classical languages possess an axiomatic structure i.e. only the least number of necessary ideas are taken to be true, in this case the common root of the words, for further development of other new concepts from these ideas, in this case the various other words formed. This portrays the Classical languages as the epitome of linguistic order and perfection.

The scientific face of the Classical languages extrapolates to an artistic face, which is no less marvellous. The corpus of Greek and Roman literature is furnished with literally any topic one may imagine. From Philosophy to Biology, historical anecdotes to battle plans, grand epics to lyric poetry, politics to administration and even perfumery or the section of a cylinder. There are treatises on each one of these topics and many more. Moreover, these works tend to shape our knowledge of the humanities to this

day. For example, Classical lyric poetry, which is based largely on the poet's emotions and impulse, often sets the bar for how we think about poetry in both aspects of form and content today. In other words, a Greek or Latin lyric poem is aesthetically similar to one from 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American poetry and most probably treats similar themes.

Thus, the Classics prove to be the unique synthesis of the Arts and the Sciences, whilst reflecting the complete vision of human nature itself which the Greeks and the Romans so intelligently possessed. Much of what we say and perhaps even do today is a direct reception of Classical tradition. The beauty, knowledge, and insight the Classics have to offer bring unification to the human self and are a steady path to the deep root of humanity. In my view, it is by ironically going back in time that the Classics give us the opportunity to progress forward.

*Andrew is a first-year undergraduate student of Classics and Philosophy within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta. He is also a member of the MCA executive committee.*