



What is so ‘classical’ about Classical Reception? Theories, Methodologies and Future Prospects¹

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Abstract:

This paper delivered at the University of Rio on 3rd June 2015 seeks to explore different approaches to the most fundamental questions in classical reception studies. What is classical reception? And more particularly what is so ‘classical’ about classical reception? It discusses current trends in theory and methodology via an analysis of two cinematic receptions of the ancient story of Electra; one that proclaims its debt to a classical text while the other masks its classical connections.

Keywords: classical reception; Electra; Cacoyannis; Angelopoulos

Resumo: Este trabalho apresentado na Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro em 3 de junho de 2015 busca explorar as diferentes abordagens sobre as questões mais fundamentais dos estudos de recepção dos clássicos. O que é a recepção dos clássicos? E, mais especificamente, o que há de tão ‘clássico’ na recepção dos clássicos? O trabalho discute tendências correntes na teoria e metodologia através de uma análise de duas recepções cinematográficas da história antiga de Electra: uma que proclama sua dívida ao texto clássico, enquanto a outra mascara suas conexões clássicas.

Palavras-chave: recepção dos clássicos; Electra; Cacoyannis; Angelopoulos.

¹ This article is the result of a lecture presented at UFMG and UFRJ, in Rio de Janeiro, where I conducted research in the local archives devoted to Nelson Rodrigues, and discussed Classical Reception theory and the case study of the performance reception of Electra in Greece and in Brazil. I would like to thank the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais (FAPEMIG) for awarding me the scholarship that enabled me to research and publish the project "The reception of Greek Classical Culture in Brazilian Theater – the case of Electra and its rhetorical and ethical developments".

What is classical reception? This is a question that has preoccupied me in the last couple of years as I chaired the team that co-authored a new online MA in Classical Studies at the Open University¹. My colleague Paula James and I were given the remit to write the section of the new module devoted to classical reception. As always I believe that it is in trying to explain to students what classical reception is that one realizes how hard it actually is to answer this important question.

In the Oxford English Dictionary the term reception is defined as ‘the acceptance of ideas or impressions into the mind’². Its root is given as the Greek word αἴσθησις (perception) and the Latin verbs ‘recipero’ (to recover/regain) and ‘recipio’ (to recover), the latter being the one that linguistically generated our modern term of ‘reception’. So even on the conceptual level reception is closely linked to classical antiquity. In thinking about where we stand and where we are heading is often useful to consider how it all began. Reception studies draw on reader-response theories that originated in Germany in the 1960s, particularly the work of scholars like Hans Robert Jauss (1982), Wolfgang Iser (1978), and later Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960, 2nd edn. 1965). Reader-response criticism focuses on the pivotal role played by the reader in the formulation of meaning. Each reader receives a text in his/her own unique way, depending on his or her education, life experience, and agenda.

Reception theory rejects the existence of the one, original, objective and fixed text that has to be examined as a pure art form as new criticism and many postmodern theorists would argue. In reception we speak rather in terms of text‘s’, plural because each time a text is read it is being received and interpreted in a new way. This has proven to be of particular value for the study of classics, where the texts and the material culture of the ancient world survive only in fragmentary form. Classical texts are often incomplete, disputed, recovered from a variety of sources, and re-interpreted by each generation of classical scholars. Classical reception focuses on the way in which the classical world is received in subsequent centuries and in particular on those aspects of the classical sources that are altered, marginalized, or neglected. The difference between reception and the study of the classical tradition is that reception

¹ For more details see: <http://www.openuniversity.edu/courses/postgraduate/modules/a863> (accessed 26/5/2016).

² *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989, 2nd edn.), quoted in Kurtz (2004: 31). For a definition of ‘reception’ with particular application to the discipline of Classics, see *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2012: 1256-57).

offers more of an all-inclusive model of the study of this phenomenon and one that does not offer a canonical reading of the classical model to the detriment of its reception. Reception is about our dialogue with the classical past, whatever form that takes, and as a two-way conversation rather than as a monologue prioritizing one or the other.

But I think that the more pertinent question to pose is what is so ‘classical’ about classical reception, because there are many other forms of ‘reception’ out there. In fact the other members of the writing team insisted that I explain reception with reference to a non-classical example. And I could see their point if one was thinking about students who are wholly unfamiliar with the concept of reception. In the end I chose to point them in the direction of the film *West Side Story*, a popular reception of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. I could also not resist a reference to the more recent film of the same title starring Leonardo di Caprio (*Romeo + Juliet*, 1996), which interestingly largely retained the Shakespearean text while making it sound like the slang used by American gangs; in my view, one of the most successful cinematic receptions of this Shakespearean tragedy.

In contrast to this general example, I offered my students three scholarly examples of attempts to define classical reception. The first ‘definition’ appears in Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray’s introduction to their edited collection *A Companion to Classical Receptions*:

By ‘receptions’ we mean the way in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imagined and represented (2008: 1).

The definition makes a point of referring to the reception of both ancient Greece and Rome. But there is an implied emphasis here on the textual aspects of reception revealed in the use of the terms ‘translated’ and ‘rewritten’, which is born out in the selection of articles that make up this collection³.

My second example comes from Charles Martindale’s introduction to *Classics and the Uses of Reception*. This ‘definition’ makes explicit reference to the cross-disciplinarity of classical reception:

³ Although there are a number of notable exceptions, including two important chapters on screen receptions by McDonald and Paul.

Reception within classics encompasses all work concerned with postclassical material, much of which in other humanities departments might well be described under different rubrics: for example, history of scholarship, history of the book, film and media studies, performance history, translation studies, reader-response and personal voice criticism, postcolonial studies, medieval and Neo-Latin and much else besides... (2006: 5).

Martindale names many of the research areas that have risen in prominence within classical reception studies in recent years, while also reflecting some of his own interests, particularly in questions of theory, methodology and Latin poetry. It is worth noting that Martindale writes that reception is concerned with ‘postclassical material’, whereas other reception theorists argue that reception begins in antiquity, which is also my own view (e.g. Euripides’ *Electra* as a reception of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*).

The third ‘definition’ by Ahuvia Kahane focuses specifically on Greek tragedy, which was of particular interests for the students that wish to study the reception block:

Reception studies subsume many geographic, temporal, national, political, ethnic, and gendered categories. They cover performance, interpretation, appropriation, and the reappropriation and reuse of Greek tragedy at *all* times (2014: 844).

Kahane argues for an inclusive approach both in terms of geographical, racial, political, and gender differences as well as of medium and chronology. The author has strong research interests in reception, part of the reason why he was invited to write an entry entitled ‘Methodological Approaches to Greek Tragedy’ for *The Encyclopedia of Greek Tragedy* (2014: 839-49). In his discussion Kahane emphasizes the diversity of approaches and material that classical reception encompasses and their importance in helping us to demonstrate the relevance of the classical past today.

It is also worth noting that Martindale’s ‘definition’ emphasizes the multi-disciplinarity of reception, while Kahane’s stresses different categories (geography, race, gender etc.). This is just one example of the diversity of approaches that classical reception encompasses. The point of this exercise is to demonstrate to students that scholarly contributions to the reception debate, as indeed in other fields of scholarship, are often not presented as definitive. They are designed to lead to further discussion and to help shape the form that future research in the field might

take. Ultimately, I was very careful to point out to our students that we simply cannot offer them a definitive answer to the question of ‘What is classical reception?’. It is the journey towards arriving at a definition that is what matters and it is up to each one of them to choose the one that best helps them understand the concept and fits in more readily with their own research interests.

What is so classical about classical reception remains a fundamental question. All of us working in the field should keep asking it of ourselves, and of our work. After all one of the main advantages of this theoretical and methodological approach is that it encourages us to be self-reflective, to question what it is that we are trying to accomplish and the process by which we arrive at our conclusions. Reception invites us to reveal our personal agenda and how it acts as a lens through which our understanding of the Graeco-Roman classics and the history of their reception is filtered and at times distorted. For example, I will freely admit that there a bias towards a performative paradigm in my work in the wider sense of ‘performance’, defined by Edith Hall as ‘an aesthetic phenomenon in which humans have realized an archetypal text, narrative or idea by acting, puppet manipulation, dance, recital or song’ (2010: 10). One of the key ways in which audiences have responded to ancient narratives and in particular to dramatic texts from classical antiquity is through live performance. I would argue that this approach, backed up by rigorous textual analysis and an investigation of the key role, played by the audience in performance, opens up some exciting possibilities for the future.

What is so classical about classical reception is also a timely question to be asking at this precise moment, as reception studies are currently entering a new and exciting phase. Lorna Hardwick’s seminal textbook *Reception Studies* (2003) is already over a decade old. In the intervening years the discussion has been ongoing, but I see this as a sign of the health of the discipline. There is a climate of self-examination and re-evaluation among classical reception scholars. We are not yet set in our ways; we have not adopted canonical positions. After all the agency of the reader is stressed in reception studies. To give you a concrete example, the eminent classical reception theorist Charles Martindale returned twenty years later to his groundbreaking monograph *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (1993) in a special issue of the *Classical Receptions Journal* (2013). In the article he argues that ‘reception is figured dialogically, as a two-way process of

understanding, backwards and forwards, which illuminates antiquity as much as modernity’ (2013: 169). He concludes with another key statement and a call to arms:

... no work of art has its meaning wholly determined by its point of origin, which is one reason why we need reception. The second is that we must go to the past if we are to make new the present, which is why the past is as important as the present (2013: 181).

I think one of the most exciting directions in which the discussion on theory is headed is that we are beginning to question the most fundamental relationship in classical reception studies that between source text A and reception text B. Previously we have focused on examining cases where a contemporary reception lays claim to specific ancient text(s) or artifacts as models. Where traditional text-based criticism might simply fact-check to see whether there is a real correspondence and how close or ‘faithful’ the reception text manages to be, promoted by adaptation studies perhaps we should ask: are there different kinds of ‘indirect’ adaptations, and how are these to be identified and interpreted? Is intention required, and if so, whose intention and when? Is this not complicated by the conditions of production specific to the reception and its medium?

What about the troubled question of fidelity or authenticity? Post-classical artists laying claim to a source text often have idiosyncratic, fuzzy, or impure notions of that text, whereas fidelity posits objective texts A and B that can be scientifically and quantitatively measured against each other. Instead, we should work towards complicating the notion of a pure source text and dissolving hard boundaries between text, reception, tradition, and interpretive communities⁴. And what about cases where the ‘source text’ is no longer so sharply defined and where receptions seem to claim descent from diffuse notions (e.g. Greek tragedy, ancient Rome, or classical myth) rather than specific source texts. My conclusion is that we must challenge the hierarchical relationship A → B implicit in traditional theories of reception. Such Platonic hierarchies posit an endlessly rich, self-contained, and self-identical ‘original’ text which is reflected, strongly or weakly, in later derivative works. In place of these we could adopt post-structural alternatives, options such as juxtaposition (wherein texts coexist side-by-side, on the same plane, rather than in

⁴ My understanding of these issues has been greatly enriched through discussions with Ricardo Apostol of Case Western University.

relationships of priority or dominance, at least in the reader’s mind) or simulacra (Baudrillard’s denial of originality and authenticity in favor of a system wherein everything is equally imitative). I would argue that we should engage with concepts from the discipline of comparative literature, about what the act of comparison actually entails if we wish to do more than simply follow lines of artistic influence. We must problematize notions of historicist influence and the need to discover underlying universal structures in order to ground comparisons between ancient and modern works.

It is also worth noting that we are currently expanding our classical reception research interests ever outwards. A pertinent example of this trend, are two books that might be of particular interest to you as they focus on the reception of Greece and Rome in Latin America:

. K. Boshier, F. Macintosh, J. McConnell and P. Rankine (2014) (eds), *Oxford Handbook to Greek Drama in the Americas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

. R. Andújar and K. P. Nikoloutsos, *Greeks and Romans on the Contemporary Latin American Stage*, Classical Presences, Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

Collaboration in Classical Reception Studies

Talking with my mentor Lorna Hardwick last June at the *Greeks and Romans on the Latin American Stage* conference, co-organised by Rosa Andújar and Konstantinos Nikoloutsos at UCL (the starting point for the second volume mentioned above). We both agreed on an important aspect of conducting research in classical reception today, namely the need for collaboration. As the profuse acknowledgements that preceded the papers delivered at the conference demonstrated none of us can or indeed should work in isolation. Reception involves so many different perspectives that no single person can ever hope to master it all. That means that we must work together in order to produce research that maintains its integrity and is truly inclusive and cross-disciplinary.

As my case study for illustrating my current theoretical and methodological thinking on the subject of what is so ‘classical’ about classical reception I have

chosen to investigate a masked cinematic reception of the ancient story of Electra: Theo Angelopoulos’ *O Thiasos* (1975). This indirect reception is compared to one that is more closely based on an ancient source text: Michael Cacoyannis’ *Electra* (1962), modeled on Euripides’ eponymous tragedy. My approach reflects my view that theory should reflect practice and not the other way round. I don’t believe in trying to squeeze a case study into the straightjacket of a theory, rather theory and methodology should arise out of practical considerations that face us in the study of a particular case of reception. Let me first, though conclude this section of my talk, by paraphrasing James Porter who wrote that reception is ‘all there is’ (Porter 2008: 469). I would argue instead that reception is ‘everything’: when we study the classics we become part of the ongoing process of their reception.

Theo Angelopoulos’ *O Thiasos* (1975) vs. Michael Cacoyannis’ *Electra* (1962): Two contrasting approaches to the cinematic reception of the ancient story of Electra

Before we begin our investigation of Angelopoulos’ *Thiasos* it might be useful for you to cast your mind back to another Modern Greek cinematic reception of Electra’s story, Michael Cacoyannis’ *Electra* (1962)⁵. In contrast to Angelopoulos’ film, Cacoyannis’ *Electra* expressly proclaims its connections to an ancient source text, namely Euripides’ drama *Electra* (c. 422-413 BCE). It is unarguably a much more direct reception of the ancient tragedian’s dramatic text. Nonetheless Cacoyannis’ film remains a creative adaptation of the ancient material it is based on and not a slavish imitation. It is also a landmark Modern Greek film that has shaped my own approach to the study of the tragic heroine Electra. A characteristic scene that showcases both the debt that Cacoyannis owes to Euripides’ tragedy, but also of the radical changes he introduced to his source text is the point in the film where Electra is attacked by Aegisthus at the tomb of her father, King Agamemnon.

In Cacoyannis’ reception the chorus leads Electra to her father’s burial site, represented by a simple slab on the ground (see figure 1). Electra makes an offering of branches, but her devotions are disturbed by the appearance of Aegisthus and his

⁵ A showing of Cacoyannis’ *Electra* with a commentary by Beatriz de Paoli (Letras Clássicas – UFRJ) was organized a week before this talk was delivered. On Cacoyannis’ *Electra* see: Bakogianni (2011: 153-94).

soldiers. He strikes Electra and taunts her when she predicts that Orestes will return. When Electra is thrown to the ground Cacoyannis reveals her pain by using the camera in a series of rapidly whirling movements that give the viewer a sense of vertigo. Interposing scenes of the sky and the men on horses riding full tilt at the heroine and the chorus encourages the viewers to sympathise with Electra as the victim of Aegisthus’ cruelty.



Figure 1: Electra mourning at the tomb of Agamemnon
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The defilement of Agamemnon’s grave is only suggested in Euripides’ source text:

This infamous man, so they say, leaps onto the grave,
attacks with stones our father’s stony monument
and he dares to raise this question:
‘Where is your son Orestes?’ (*Electra* 327-30)

The heroine mentions it to the messenger supposedly sent by her brother not realising that she is in fact speaking to Orestes. The story of the defilement might therefore not be altogether correct, but meant to rouse Orestes’ anger, so that he will return and prove his courage by avenging this insult. In Sophocles’ *Electra* (444-46) the heroine refers to the dishonourable killing of her father and the mutilation of his body. But it is Chrysothemis who visits him tomb and takes Electra’s offerings to it. Cacoyannis’ decision to add the scene at the tomb manipulates the audience into seeing Electra as an innocent victim heroically resisting a tyrant. Her later actions in the film, her active participation in the planning and execution of the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, are more excusable in light of her ill treatment. We can therefore argue that Cacoyannis borrows what he needs from all four of the surviving

Greek tragedies, which feature Electra and uses them in the service of his own personal vision of the tragic heroine.

By filming the scene at the grave Cacoyannis presents us with a sympathetic picture of Electra, while Aegisthus is cast in the role of villain. He and his soldiers appear suddenly and use their horses to intimidate Electra and the chorus. The soldiers also seize Electra and restrain her while Aegisthus contemptuously scatters her offerings to her father’s tomb. When Electra reminds him that Orestes will one day return he slaps her (figure 2). For the audience these scenes emphasise the victimization of the heroine by a corrupt and tyrannical ruler. Cacoyannis’ decision to have Aegisthus physically attack Electra breaks the ancient performance conventions of the genre, but it does serve to increase sympathy for his heroine.



Figure 2: Aegisthus harasses Electra
Copyright © The Michael Cacoyannis Foundation

This scene is illustrative of Cacoyannis’ creative process in terms of his transplantation of Euripides’ tragedy into the modern medium of cinema. It is also one of the director’s additions to his ancient model, inserted as a means of emphasizing the villainy of Aegisthus. Electra visits the tomb of her father in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi* (458 BCE), but not in any of the other ancient dramas in which Electra features, namely Euripides and Sophocles’ *Electra* plays and the former’s *Orestes* (408 BCE).

Cacoyannis, in choosing to add this scene of his heroine’s visit to the simple grave of Agamemnon located deep in the countryside, is tapping into one of Electra’s

most popular strands of reception; her portrayal as a mourner (Bakogianni 2011: 195). Electra’s visit to Agamemnon’s tomb where she meets her brother Orestes was depicted in ancient Greek art. An example can be seen on this Athenian white-ground *lekythos* (figure 3) dated to 460-440 BCE⁶. It is precisely these two seminal moments in the story of Electra that inspired later artists. For example, John Flaxman’s three drawings of Electra, one depicting her as leading a procession of mourners to her father’s tomb (1795) and two of her meeting with her brother (1795 and unfinished drawing)⁷. There is also Lord Frederic Leighton’s *Electra at the tomb of Agamemnon* (1869, Ferens Art Gallery in Hull, UK) highlighting the intensity of heroine’s mourning, and Sir William Richmond Blake’s *Electra at the tomb of Agamemnon* (1874, owned by the Art Gallery of Ontario in Canada) depicting Electra mourning her father together with her attendants and Orestes⁸. Electra’s portrayal in the visual arts thus cemented her reputation as the mourner *par excellence* of Greek tragedy. Cacoyannis wanted to tap into this vein of Electra’s reception in order to make his heroine more sympathetic to his audience. Even some of the framing and the composition of the scene of Electra’s visit to her father’s tomb in Cacoyannis are reminiscent of Electra’s portrayal in the visual arts.



Figure 3: The meeting of Electra and Orestes at the tomb of Agamemnon
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⁶ For more information see Bakogianni (2011: 22).

⁷ For more information see Bakogianni (2009: 28-34).

⁸ For more information see Bakogianni (2011: 119-51).

In marked contrast to Cacoyannis’ reception, Theo Angelopoulos did not set out to create a cinematic version of any of the three ancient tragedians’ dramas. His film *The Travelling Players* (1975) instead follows a troupe of actors, the *thiasos* of the title. The film’s premise is thus inherently meta-theatrical. The actors’ personal lives and dramas play out against the historical events that shook the modern state of Greece in the years between 1939-52. During this turbulent period Greece was attacked and occupied by the Nazis (1941-44), was bitterly divided by a civil war (1946-49), and suffered from economic problems made worse by bitter political rivalries. Theo Angelopoulos’s reception of ancient Greece in his films is characterized by his desire to submerge it into his storylines rather than to directly adapt it. He appropriated plotlines, characters, and motifs from Greek myth, epic, and tragedy and transplanted them into a modern *mise-en-scène* to enhance the impact of the creative new work. Angelopoulos’ borrowing elicits a multi-layered response from knowledgeable members of the audience, familiar with the classical models. It deepens their encounter with both source and filmic reception, but always in the service of the new work. In *Thiasos* the very structure of the story is reimagined as a Greek tragedy, which is the dominant classical pattern in this trilogy about inescapable ‘moira’ (fate/destiny), playing off the modern understanding of ‘tragedy’ as ending in catastrophe. The director invites his audience to view twentieth-century Modern Greek history itself as an ancient tragedy. This enables him to explore the Modern Greek belief in the idea of an unbroken ‘continuity’ between ancient and modern Greece and to comment on the burden of the past on Modern Greek artists.

Angelopoulos’ reception of the classical past is always indirect. Its presence felt in terms of themes and moving vignettes; like shadows that drift across the film rather than direct adaptations of classical stories or characters. Angelopoulos recasts important historical events in mythical terms thus providing the necessary critical distance that allows his audiences to engage with these traumatic moments in Modern Greek history. The director’s selective and fragmented dialogue with the past exemplifies the key role that ancient Greece has played in art cinema and the contribution of Modern Greek directors to this alternative approach to filming that challenges the dominant Hollywood medium.

In Angelopoulos’ *Thiasos* the brother of the protagonist is called Orestes, although none of the other members of the family are referred to by their ancient

names. His name alone, however, establishes a connection with the classical story without over-emphasizing it by the addition of the other names. The presence of a second sister in the film suggests that Angelopoulos might be referencing Sophocles because Chrysothemis only appears in his drama. The epic tone of his film, however, is more reminiscent of Aeschylus’ famous trilogy, while the inherent irony and his realistic portrayal of the motivation of his characters echo Euripides. But Angelopoulos’ Orestes dies near the end of the film. He is executed for refusing to disavow his communist beliefs. His sister is summoned to collect his dead body from the prison where he was held. This modern version of Electra thus mourns both her father and her brother. In an interesting meta-theatrical gesture she leads a round of applause at his funeral. Despite his many years as a rebel fighter ultimately the troupe remembers him best as the actor who played the young lover in the Greek romantic melodrama *Golfo*.

Electra’s love for her brother is undiminished in Angelopoulos’ film. She never betrays him even when she is interrogated while being raped by a group of right-wing secret policemen. Unlike Cacoyannis, however, Angelopoulos distances the viewer from Electra’s abuse at the hands of the police. Any empathy that the audience might have felt for her is immediately dispelled by the commencement of her monologue. This device that Angelopoulos uses at two more key moments in his film is designed to embed the personal dramas of the actors into the wider historical and political Modern Greek context. The rape scene is intercut with Electra’s monologue, where she faces the camera (see figure 4) and recounts the events that led to the battle of Athens in December of 1944 when demonstrators clashed with British forces on the streets of the capital. Angelopoulos thus utilizes Brecht’s ‘*Verfremdungseffekt*’ (the deliberate alienation of the spectator) to remind his audience that what they are watching is an artificial artistic product and not real life.



Figure 4: Screenshot from Electra's monologue in Angelopoulos' *O Thiasos* (1975)

The one scene in the film where the classical story is most strongly evoked is the double-murder of the mother and her paramour. In the film Orestes, returns briefly and is guided by Electra to the theatre, where the acting troupe is once again performing *Golfo*. His reasons for wanting vengeance, however, are not solely personal. His mother's lover betrayed Orestes and his father to the Germans. The father was executed by a German firing squad and Electra was nearly expelled from the troupe. Orestes joins the communist resistance fighting the Nazis. Personal motivations are thus overlaid in Angelopoulos' film by political considerations. This modern Orestes walks on stage and shoots his mother's paramour in the back as he attempts to escape. He then murders his own mother before the eyes of the audience, who applaud his actions thinking they are part of the 'performance' (figure 5)⁹.



⁹ In Greek tragedy violence is usually confined to the off-stage space and then reported by a messenger. Both Angelopoulos and Cacoyannis break this rule. Michelakis argues against 'Showing what should not be seen' [sic] (Michelakis 2013: 24) in his discussion of *The Legend of Oedipus* (1912).

Figure 5: The corpses of the mother and her paramour onstage¹⁰

What is particularly interesting about this scene is the confusion of the audience, who think that what they are watching is a play instead of reality. And yet the internal audience watching the play is also being watched by the external audience of Angelopoulos’ film, thus creating a two-tiered game of spectatorship. The audience’s applause at this point in the film is echoed later on at the funeral. Both are occasions when the theatre audience and the actors’ reactions seem inappropriate to the occasion. Angelopoulos thus imbues the act of viewing with discomfort and a sense of alienation. The line between reality and fiction is deliberately blurred in Angelopoulos’ movie, drawing attention to the artificiality of the medium of cinema and problematizing the role played by the viewer.

Angelopoulos’ *Thiasos* compounds this confusion by not offering its audience a realistic, linear narrative. Instead the viewer is presented with a surrealistic chronological puzzle that he/she has to put together in order to interpret the action and to form an opinion about the ‘meaning’ of the film. Cacoyannis’ *Electra*, on the other hand, offers its audience a fully realized cinematic reception of Euripides’ play. In several interviews Cacoyannis talked about the special relationship he felt he enjoyed with Euripides. For him Euripides was the most modern of the three ancient tragedians¹¹. Angelopoulos, on the other hand, wanted to exorcise the mythical past. He was convinced that this was a necessary step for the modern state to take to free itself from the burden of the past. Cacoyannis wanted to utilize the popularity of the medium of cinema to bring Greek tragedy to the masses. Angelopoulos was more interested in the problems facing the modern state and its turbulent state in the twentieth century, and yet tantalizing shadows of classical myths and dramas serve to darken even further many of his films.

Angelopoulos’ *Thiasos* offers his audience a bleak picture of Greece, snowy and sunless. This is as far from the postcard view of Greece as a land of sun, beaches, and ancient ruins as you can get. Much of the action of the film in fact takes place in winter with rain and even snow falling. The acting troupe travels through poor

¹⁰ <https://magnoliaforever.wordpress.com/2012/07/10/the-travelling-players-1975/> (accessed 26/5/2016).

¹¹ ‘And I feel that in terms of what we are going through today, all of the relevant messages are to be found in his work.’ (Cacoyannis, 1984: 214).

villages and small cities in search of work. They perform in local tavernas, and small theatres. There is certainly no grandeur and no classical ruins in *Thiasos*, unlike the prologue of Cacoyannis’ *Electra* set in the ruins of Mycenae. The length of the film, nearly four hours, and its slow pace encourage a contemplative reading of Angelopoulos’ cinematic text. The device of the play within a play recurs throughout the movie constantly reminding the audience of the artificiality of the very act of watching a film. Another case in point is this scene where the actors create an impromptu performance for a group of British soldiers they encounter on a beach. This serves as yet another visual reminder to the viewer of the theatricality of the film and draws attention to the fact that we are watching a performance.

One could argue that Angelopoulos’ protagonists resemble mythical archetypes swept up in the maelstrom of Modern Greek history rather than fully embodied characters. *Thiasos*, like many of Angelopoulos’ films, problematize modern Greece’s relationship with the classical past, and even with the very act of watching a film itself. Angelopoulos’ ‘fuzzy’ (Hardwick 2011: 56-57) connections with the classical past and his highly selective appropriation of classical myth and drama offers us precisely the type of ‘indirect’ receptions that are most useful for those hoping to re-visit the problem of what is so ‘classical’ about classical reception. The problems faced by scholars wishing to engage closely with such masked receptions leads to important theoretical and methodological choices. Who ultimately determines that there is a connection to a classical source(s), is it classical scholars? Is it the movie critics, or the movie’s audience(s)? Or is it a combination of the above? And finally does that even matter? Once a connection is made, another link is forged in the chain of receptions that ties us to the classical past and its rich culture.

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