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Review of Meredith E. Safran (ed.): *Screening the Golden Ages of the Classical Tradition*

Edinburgh University Press (Edinburgh 2019), 329 pp., ISBN: 9781474440844 , £ 80.00 (b, also available as pb and e-book) including filmography, bibliography and index

Meredith Safran's edited collection of essays on the golden ages of Greece and Rome as represented in film and television in the twentieth and twenty-first century is a welcome addition to the *Screening Antiquity* series from Edinburgh University Press. Many of the American authors draw parallels between the ancient construction of a lost golden age and a modern nostalgia for a supposed past golden age of America, both historic and cinematic. A wish to return to conservative values and to "Make America Great Again", a quote from Republic presidents Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump (and also Democrat Bill Clinton), used by Vincent Tomasso to illustrate a discussion of different types of nostalgia, underpins contemporary American politics, and the essays within this collection, which provide a commentary on the modern American context of production of the films and television series as well as on their relationship with the ancient world. The volume is split into two halves, the first focussing on films and television series that have a predominant relationship with ancient Greece, and the second with ancient Rome. Black and white illustrations are included within each

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chapter, comprising film stills and screenshots.

In her introduction Safran discusses the use of the golden age in the works of Hesiod, Vergil, Ovid and other ancient authors, and chooses two very different modern American media texts as points of comparison in order to explore the golden age theme for the twenty-first century—the science fiction series *100* (2014–) and the Woody Allen film *Midnight in Paris* (2011). Safran finds that in *100* the return to a bucolic existence in a settlement named "Arkadia" proves impossible for the human survivors of a nuclear holocaust, and the benefits of technology are at best ambivalent; as a necessity for survival but also the original cause of the disaster. *Midnight in Paris* offers the protagonist the opportunity to travel back in time to a supposed golden age, an experience which is ultimately disappointing, as the golden age of the imagination could never exist in reality.

Part one, "The Glory that was Greece" starts and ends with chapters focussing on popular fantasy television series, with the remaining chapters discussing films across a range of genres (fantasy, comedy, superhero/action and arthouse films). The first chapter, written by Tomasso, introduces Svetlana Boym's ideas of "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia, with reference to the *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* episode "Once A Hero" (1996). Tomasso argues that the *Hercules* series and this episode in particular look back to the golden age of Pepla films from the 1950s, but rather than recreating the ideal hero from these films, the hero of "Once A Hero" is seen through the lens of the late twentieth century. Jason is restored as a hero by Hercules as therapist, and female characters are given greater prominence, with Medea as culpable villain rather than love interest, and Phoebe as the female hero of the future; an Argonaut for the next generation.

Safran's own chapter focusses on the fantasy "disco" film *Xanadu* (1980), a film looking back to Hollywood's golden age of musicals, whilst also looking forward to a more progressive modern age, with the classical muses used as the catalyst through which change can be achieved. Platte discusses the use of folk songs in *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) creating nostalgia for a constructed past in America, and highlighting how this constructed past can be used by different groups for their own aims. Ross' chapter places *300* (2006) within a golden age of superhero movies whilst also drawing on the golden age of Greece. Ross argues that the 300 Spartans, and particularly Leonidas, are created in the image of Homeric heroes, so that Leonidas can be both Achilles and a superhero. Easton's chapter focusses on the sequel to *300, 300: Rise of An Empire* (2014), a film that has received less critical attention than its predecessor. Easton demonstrates how the city of Athens is presented in the film in order to sub-

ordinate Athens to Sparta, with the "flesh and blood" Spartan warriors portrayed as superior to their Athenian stone counterparts. The lens of Athens is also used to discuss the film's themes and characters.

Scioli focusses on the use of the ancient Greek past merged with modern elements in Dassin's *Phaedra* (1962) as a companion film to his earlier film *Never on a Sunday* (1960), with its protagonist Alexis portrayed as a character caught between the ancient and modern in Greece and Britain. Gawlinski's chapter brings us back to Safran's discussion of the impossibility of a return to bucolic golden age in microcosm in *100* with this theme playing out again at the beginning of season 4 of the zombie series *The Walking Dead* (2010–). Protagonist Rick puts away his gun to become a farmer, like Cicinnatus, but the community is torn apart by a plague, and a peaceful democracy is quickly replaced by martial autocracy.

Part two, "The Grandeur that was Rome", again includes films and television series across a range of genres and periods of production. In Day's chapter the *Aeneid* is compared with golden age Westerns. Day argues that both the Western genre and the epic poem look back to a historic golden age, the age of Western expansion in America, and the formation of Rome respectively, whilst also being part of the golden ages of Latin literature and American films. Continuing with the *Aeneid*, Rea focusses on Joss Whedon's short-lived science fiction series *Serenity* (2005), and the price that needs to be paid for a post-war golden age, whether this is Augustus' Rome or a post-war future, where the peaceful solution curtails personal freedom and is based on a lie. West discusses how the HBO series *Rome* (2005–2007) presents Octavian as sexually deviant, with his own supposed morality as Augustus revealed as a façade, thus questioning the golden age of Augustus that is beginning as the series ends. Prince's chapter on *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) makes a comparison between Agrippina the Younger and Cersei Lannister. They are both ultimately unsuccessful female rulers, who dominate and cause the deaths of their ruling husbands, then aim to rule through their sons, but are unable to control the excesses of Nero/Joffrey and are supplanted by would-be wives Poppaea/Margery.

Moving from television to film, Strong discusses films where Roman imperialism is portrayed positively. Strong argues that Italian films *Cabiria* (1914) and *Scipione l'Africano* (1937) portray Rome's war with the Carthaginians, with a thinly-veiled modern Italy as Rome fighting against the barbarians, whilst *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) presents Rome as multicultural and *Life of Brian* (1979) shows that the Romans did indeed do a lot of positive things for us. *Gladiator* (2000), *The Eagle* (2011), *Centurion* (2010) and *The Last*

Legion (2007) promote the Roman ideal of martial masculinity, even where some Romans are corrupt. Strong discusses the political climate in Italy, the US and the UK at the time of production, informing these representations of Rome.

McAuley's chapter also focusses on *Centurion* and *The Eagle,* and the change in how Roman warfare is depicted in post 9/11 films, from pitched battles with mostly nameless disciplined Romans in Cold War era films to guerrilla warfare and moral ambiguity in the twenty-first century. McAuley compares these films, set in Roman Britain, to war films set in Vietnam and the war in Iraq, and argues that the films focus on the individual soldier and the psychological effects of warfare, where atrocities are committed on both sides. The collection ends with Taylor's discussion of *Gladiator,* a film that she argues creates ideas of a golden age of Rome, in the wishes of Marcus Aurelius to reinstate the republic, and Maximus' wish to return to agrarian utopia, then undercuts these ideas with self-serving senators and the destruction of Maximus' farm in Spain paving the way for a personal revenge plot. Taylor points out that *Gladiator* marked a potential return to the golden age of Roman epic films, but rather than creating a "realistic" Rome, the film highlights its own use of modern technology, creating a CGI Rome for the modern viewer who remains aware of the artificiality of the medium.

The collection is wide-ranging in terms of the films and television series covered, and will be of interest to scholars of film and television reception. With a few exceptions (notably Strong's chapter discussing Italian and British films) the essays offer an American-centric approach to the modern popular media, however, this should not be seen as a disadvantage, as the authors use a range of theoretical frameworks. Some of the chapters engage more fully with the golden age theme, including the chapters by Safran, Tomasso, Day and Rea, but other essays offer insightful analysis, and the book in its entirety is a useful and timely contribution to the field of classical reception studies.

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