

THE RECEPTION OF CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

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Abstract

In recent decades, studies on Classical Antiquity have begun to encompass the impact of ancient civilizations on the formation of national identities, their uses, and resummptions from political and artistic aspects, linked to the cultural products of the 20th and 21st centuries. Understanding the relevance of the ancient world and its different appropriations and reinterpretation in the last three centuries, this article discusses the results obtained within the scope of the project *A Recepção da Antiguidade Clássica na Contemporaneidade* (The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Contemporaneity – 2000-2020), developed at UNESPAR – Campus Paranaguá, from 2022 to 2023. Quantitative data from five research axes (films, music albums, comics, series, and games) are presented. From these data, some partial considerations are presented, especially on the relationship between reception studies and the teaching of History.

Keywords

Reception studies; History teaching.

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Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, os estudos sobre a Antiguidade Clássica passaram a abranger também o impacto das civilizações antigas na formação de identidades nacionais, suas utilizações e retomadas a partir de aspectos políticos e artísticos, ligados aos produtos culturais próprios dos séculos XX e XXI. Compreendendo a relevância do mundo antigo e suas diferentes apropriações e releituras nos últimos três séculos, o presente artigo discorre sobre os resultados obtidos no âmbito do projeto *A Recepção da Antiguidade Clássica na Contemporaneidade* (2000-2020), desenvolvido na UNESPAR – Campus Paranaguá entre 2022 e 2023. Serão apresentados os dados quantitativos de cinco eixos de pesquisa (filmes, álbuns musicais, histórias em quadrinhos, séries e jogos). A partir dos dados, algumas considerações parciais são apresentadas, em especial sobre a relação entre os estudos da recepção e ensino de História.

Palavras-chave

Estudos da Recepção; Ensino de História.

Introduction

In September 2023, a trend became popular on social media. In it, women asked men (especially husbands, boyfriends, brothers, and fathers): *How often do you think about the Roman Empire?* The answers went viral on apps like TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) – many men, with no apparent professional connection to Classical Antiquity, claimed to think weekly or daily about the Roman Empire. Is this just an innocent trend or is it possible to perceive something deeper in the great male interest in the Roman Empire?

Far beyond the Roman Empire, Classical Antiquity is an object of desire of different temporalities. Despite its temporal remoteness, it is a historical period constantly recapitulated with different objectives and from different readings. In Nazi Germany, the Greek cultural heritage was resurrected as the basis of the Third Reich, understood as the “continuity” of the civilizational torch lit in Ancient Greece. In a similar way, Italian fascism saw its origin in the Roman Empire, defending a specific legacy – such as the strength of the family as a patriarchal institution and the *fascio* as a symbolic unit. (Silva, 2007)

The examples above, institutionalized in nature and located temporally in the first half of the 20th century, are not the only forms of appropriation of Classical Antiquity. According to Zuckerberg, in recent decades different discourses have emerged about Stoic ideals for the construction of a contemporary “new masculinity”, centered on ideals of self-help, at the same time that different ancient texts – especially by authors such as Juvenal and Ovid – are revisited as behavioral models based on absolute truths. In this sense, there is an aggressive masculinity, which diminishes women and understands this practice as something common to humanity, after all, it was produced by *the great Roman men*. (Zuckerberg, 2018)

Although ancient texts are revisited in their entirety, and interpreted based on an often anachronistic logic, part of the relevance of the ancient world also resides in its subsequent appropriations by the cultural industry. We can ask ourselves: without films like *Gladiator* (2000), would so many men claim to think about the Roman Empire? Based on this, we can understand the interest in Classical Antiquity as an element also mediated by different cultural products and contemporary readings of this historical period.

Different interpretations arise from these contemporary readings of Classical Antiquity. In *The Song of Achilles*, a young adult book written by classicist Madeline Miller, the Iliad is retold by Patroclus, emphasizing his

romantic relationship with Achilles. The emphasis on the romance between the two characters can be understood as a way of popularizing the academic discussion about Achilles' homoaffectivity, deconstructing hegemonic views of an extremely heteronormative masculinity. (Laguna-Mariscal; Sanz-Morales, 2003). On the other hand, in films such as the aforementioned *Gladiator* (2000) and *Troy* (2004), what is largely praised are visions of a hegemonic masculinity supposedly present in ancient culture, whose usefulness must be emulated in contemporary times to regain a certain "cultural grandeur." However, historians and scholars of Classical Antiquity understand that not even ancient accounts of what made a great and virtuous man can be understood outside their context of production and specific interests. It is not possible, therefore, to understand contemporary cultural products as reflections of what actually occurred in Classical Antiquity – they are discursive formations with views laden with the moment of production.

With the perspective that media also produce historical meanings, the following question served as a basis for understanding the different discourses constructed about Classical Antiquity: in what way is knowledge about the Greco-Roman past instrumentalized by different media? From this question, it is possible to recognize the importance of different cultural products in the production of meanings about the past - especially about Classical Antiquity -, and how they influence not only what is understood as the past, but also the perception of *self* at the present time. This becomes even more evident when we think about the school curriculum - sixth grade students (between 10 and 12 years old) will study Ancient History for the first time, but they have often already had some contact with ancient cultures through other media, such as games, animations and comic books. Even before the contact with school knowledge, which is mediated by a specific knowledge logic, students already have contact with narratives about this ancient past, mediated in different ways by cultural products.

In this sense, the research project *A Recepção da Antiguidade na Contemporaneidade* (*The Reception of Antiquity in Contemporaneity*) was developed at UNESPAR - Paranaguá Campus, between 2022 and 2023, later redefined with a time frame between 2000 and 2020, with the aim of quantitatively analyzing only media productions based on Greco-Roman antiquity. This article will present the results found and discussed at the Thematic Symposium Antiquity and Modernity: Uses of the Past, held at the XXXII National History Symposium of the National History Association, in July 2023 in the city of São Luís - Maranhão. The data found

will be presented, with a brief discussion about future research possibilities and the relationship with History teaching.

Data presentation

Reception studies, as a field of research, constitute a space for relevant discussions in contemporary times, especially since they emphasize the continuous relationship between past and present. One of the objectives of the research project was to understand how the reception of Antiquity undertakes multiple significations of the past in contemporary times, producing different meanings of the Greco-Roman world. To this end, it was necessary, at first, to quantitatively analyze these uses in the chosen period (2000-2020). In reception studies, qualitative research is commonly carried out, with an emphasis on the peculiarities of each material produced. However, we understand that, for the purpose of this research, quantitative analysis can shed light on the dimension of media productions about the Greco-Roman world, assisting in a broader understanding of the range of these media and their different receptions.

For data collection, five distinct research axes were used, namely: movies, music, comic books, games, and series. The main methodology for data collection was data scraping, that is, automated collection of data from online databases. Instead of manually copying data found online, which takes a lot of time and effort, data scraping allows the user to automatically extract data to a database or spreadsheet (the method used in this research). (Sirisuriya, 2015) In this sense, the data extracted should comply with the proposed time frame (2000-2020), as well as the research theme.²

With more easily visualized data, it was possible to observe the relevance of different cultural appropriations of the Greco-Roman world in contemporary times, creating different readings of this period.

² Terms used for data scraping research: Ancient Greece, Ancient Greek, Ancient Rome, Roman Empire, Greek Mythology, Roman Mythology, Classical Antiquity, Classical Greece, Rome. After extraction, the data was analyzed individually to exclude any entry that was not within the established scope.

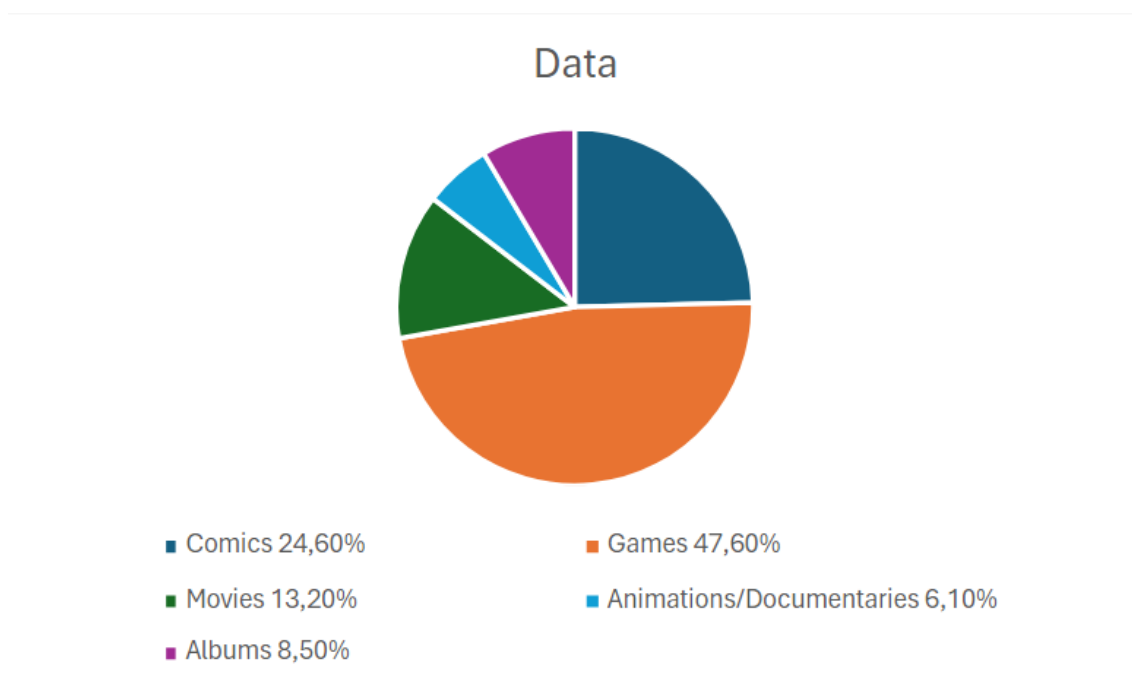


Figure 01: Graphic on media productions about Greco-Roman Antiquity between the years 2000 and 2020.³

Of the 410 entries found, 195 of these are games that meet the scope of the research. In general terms, it is possible to think of two major types of narrative within games: the first is the construction of Empires, i. e., in it, the player must use different means to be able to exercise dominance over an area, or other players. It is a type of game based mainly on the strategy of using resources, and its ultimate objective is to reach the largest possible area. Examples of this type of game include *Acropolis: The Archaic Age* (2018), *Imperator: Rome* (2019) and *Field of Glory: Empires* (2019).

The other main category is known as “hero mode”. The player acts as a protagonist within the game's narrative, achieving specific objectives for the development of the story. The characters can be real or fictional, fostering different expectations regarding the game and the narrative. As an example of this type of game, we can mention *God of War* (2005), *Ryse: Son of Rome* (2013) and *Hades* (2020). (Lowe, 2012)

Among the 25 entries on series, animations and documentaries, around 30% are serial animations. These focus mainly on ancient mythology (especially the Greek world), while documentaries deal with political aspects of the Roman Empire. The differentiation between animations and

³ Graph produced by the author based on data found in the first half of 2023. We understand that this data does not represent the totality of entries on the topic, but rather the proposed section and analysis of certain platforms.

documentaries constitutes an important element to analyze the different relationships with the production of narratives about the past.

For a long time, documentaries were understood as a narrative form of access to the truth, unlike cinematographic films, produced based on fiction. However, since the 1970s, documentaries have been analyzed as a cultural product of their time - just like fictional films. In this sense, there is no direct access to the “experience of truth” about the past simply because it is in documentary form. (Kornis, 1992) Still, there is a popular imaginary that places the documentary in a position of great (if not total) verisimilitude when dealing with the past.

In this sense, we can analyze the movement towards using this type of media to address political issues about Classical Antiquity (and, in particular, about the Roman Empire, most of the entries found in this research) as a way of legitimizing the relevance of this historical period. At the same time, its resumption can be indicative of contemporary political issues, acting as *exempla* or as alterity, the politics of the Roman Empire operates its own meaning in its different forms of reception.

The data found demonstrates the relevance of the different cultural appropriations of the Greco-Roman world in contemporary times, showing different interpretations for this period. From these data, some cross-referencing of information was performed, with the following results:

The music albums, of a conceptual nature, were produced mostly (approximately 90%) by Metal bands and their subgenres. The major themes that date back to the ancient world are anti-Christianity—or a world before it—and the violence of Antiquity. We used the idea of a concept album - that is, an album that follows a specific theme - to define the scope. This type of work is more common in Rock and its subgenres, as it seeks to legitimize a greater cultural role. (Walterberg, 2013) We understand that the use of Classical Antiquity by Heavy Metal bands refers, on the one hand, to the appropriation of characteristics dear to the musical style itself, already mentioned above. On the other hand, the reading carried by most of the bands often comes from stereotypes perpetrated by other media - especially cinema.

Films were the cultural products with the greatest popular reach and, in this sense, can be considered producers of a perception of Classical Antiquity constantly taken up for its visuality. Some of these films, such as *Gladiator* (2000), *Troy* (2004), and *300* (2006), present visual representations

of meanings, especially of masculinity, in the Greco-Roman past: honor, tradition, violence, and bellicosity, as some examples. The choices in the production of these films – many of which contradict or ignore relevant aspects of historical sources and historiographical discussions – form a perception of the ancient past and are – according to analysis of reception studies – not only producing new meanings about it but also including contemporary issues and meanings.

The last category used in the selection was comic books. About 70% of the entries were produced in the Global North, with an emphasis on Belgium (a country traditionally linked to the production of this type of media). Productions of this type, especially European, seek a playful way of taking up historical aspects, often reinforcing an ideal of cultural heritage (from Classical Antiquity to the contemporary European world).

Partial considerations

The first contact of most school-age students with Antiquity does not occur in school. Different media productions describe, at different levels of verisimilitude, aspects of the ancient world and, in this sense, are also producers of a perception of this past. It is possible to perceive the interest in the theme as something recurrent, able to capture the attention of students of different ages. However, despite this recurrence the teaching of Ancient History in Brazil is a vast field of disputes. The first version of the Brazilian National Curriculum, released in 2015, excluded the contents of Ancient and Medieval History, relegating them to a so-called Eurocentric History that is supposedly disconnected from the Brazilian reality. Although the later versions and the final version, currently used in Brazil, include the contents; a linear perspective of History is maintained, in which Antiquity and Medieval are presented throughout the sixth year, that is, in the age group of 10 to 12 years. With the new curriculum for Secondary Education, in turn, the content can no longer be taught during the school trajectory – the current model mixes History in a larger field called Applied Human and Social Sciences, to be chosen based on the demand of the students and the availability of the educational centers that offer it.

Therefore, it is possible to observe that, while Ancient History is relegated, at least in the curriculum, to an inferior role in school teaching, media productions on the subject are growing. It is not the objective here to discuss how much “historical accuracy” these media produce, but rather

to analyze the different meanings of Antiquity created from these productions. In view of the limits proposed, especially by the Curriculum guidelines and how it affects the teaching practice, this article proposes a discussion that articulates the teaching of Ancient History in the 21st century with reception studies. Within Antiquity studies, in particular, reception studies are concerned with discussions about interpretation, appropriations, uses, and depictions of the ancient past across different temporalities, emphasizing which aspects are taken up and which meanings are attributed. In a historical culture that fosters different interpretations of the ancient past, it is crucial to understand what visions on Antiquity are generated and how these can contribute to the construction of students' criticality.

From this perspective, we understand the relevance of mapping the cultural productions that influence, at different levels, the understanding of the meaning of Classical Antiquity. The objective is not to reduce cultural products to their level of "historical truth", but rather to think about the different narratives produced by them and how these discourses impact subjects, especially those of school age.

In addition to the data presented here, the project will be continued until mid-2024, with some modifications. The first objective is to create a database in Portuguese with general information about the data collected. This database, open access, will be made available on a specific page with the main data of each work (year of production, main language, producers, etc.) and a brief summary of the content. Again, the objective is not to reinforce the verisimilitude of these works with the past, but rather to publicize some basic data, which can help in a broader understanding of the meanings of these works and the types of narratives produced about Classical Antiquity. If reception studies can be understood as "the way in which Greek and Roman material was transmitted, translated, fragmented, interpreted, rewritten, rethought." (Hardwick; Stray, 2011), it is important to analyze how different perceptions about this past are constructed and how they influence the meaning of History itself.

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