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FROM HOLLYWOOD TO ANCIENT THRACE: TWO TYPES OF ARTISTIC RECEPTION OF ANTIQUITY

Abstract:

The text explores the way ancient literary, historical or mythological stories and personages are being used in modernity. The research focuses on two types of artistic reception of the epoch. The first one is the representation of ancient stories in the frames of culture industry: it explores some cinematographic implementations of ancient stories explaining the differences between the literary sources and their modern interpretations. Some emblematic examples illustrate the social or political allusions which are to be recognized in the modern artistic representations of ancient stories.

The second part of the text explores local Bulgarian festivals that include some ancient divine or heroic personage, e. g. Dionysos, Sabasius, Roman warriors, etc. The slightly altered focus of the research is due to the lack of significant cinematographic representations of antiquity in modern Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the importance of local festivals "reconstructing" or merely related to ancient rituals constantly increases in the last few years. The explored cases include for instance traditional "Roman" festivals celebrating the might of Roman army located in ancient provinces Thrace and Dacia (covering the territory of modern Bulgaria), some religious feasts connecting "ancient" elements and personages with Christian saints and traditional folklore practices, etc. The curious amalgam of various religious rituals is interpreted in terms of the attempt to "reconstruct", i. e. to compose the past in order to gain local prestige and to fabricate a coherent religious, cultural and even political history of Bulgaria.

Our perception of antiquity is inevitably fragmentary as far as fragmentary is also our knowledge of the epoch. What we have at our disposal is only a relatively solid ground for its partial reconstruction. The dominating frame of the traditional scholasticism has been systematically shaken by the products of culture industry leaving almost no space for the purely factual focus on the epoch. In the syncretic field of art the antiquity became a resource of stories and motives adaptable to illustrate practically everything (Miralles, 2009, p. 14).

The strategies of using antiquity in that particular way were established during the Renaissance when the audience's attention was attracted not by the traditional and significant stories of the antiquity – considered then a cliché, but by its extraordinary and unfamiliar to the general public myths and historical tales. These stories were very often purely imaginative and were composed on the model of existing narratives. This is why they are to be referred to rather as artistic projections and not as reconstructions of the epoch.

This reception of antiquity appeared to be quite productive because it produces stories of general validity, easily comprehensible to everyone. The ancient personages and imagery became a sort of esthetic language used by artists regardless the audience's competences in ancient history or literature. Since then, the stories related to antiquity inevitably mix facts and fiction (Winkler, 1995, p. 136). Mixing up factual and fictitious is the only possible way to meld together the fragmentary remains of the epoch and to produce a coherent story of Greco-Roman world. A significant role in the process of "melding" the fragments of the past plays the so called "visual archeology of modernity" (Gerdzhikova, 2010, p. 266), i.e. the cinema.

First part of the current text will interpret several popular usages of ancient narratives in movies. It does not aim to go into detail of the artistic decisions or to propose in-depth analysis of the contemporary culture industries, but to mark some specific features of the way antiquity may be understood in terms of modern social or political context of its reception. The second part of the research focuses on one different type of "reconstruction" of antiquity – some local Bulgarian festivals celebrating antiquity with a stress on the local dimensions and specificity of the epoch.

Part I *Visualize antiquity*

Each ancient story has the potential to influence the audience in a particular way when retold by the means of the cinema. The huge resource of paralinguistic strategies includes a wide spectrum of impact factors – from the separate close-ups to the casting itself. Roland Barthes in his essay on the movie *Julius Caesar* (1953) produced by Joseph Mankiewicz, gives an example to illustrate the "hidden meaning" of the actors'… hairstyle. According to his witty analysis, the fringe all the actors have, is to be directly related to their role in the movie plot (Barthes, 1991, p. 98–100). There is no doubt that fringes were a typical feature of Roman aristocratic hairstyle but their significance in the movie was disproportionately underlined and preferred over the

other typical distinguishing mark of the Roman male aristocracy, fully missing in the movie, – its baldness.

Another example of purposely set in the movie producer's hint may be seen in the casting of the movie *Troy* (2004), produced by Wolfgang Peterson. Brad Pitt was chosen to play the role of Achilles. The appearance of the constantly surviving trickster Brad Pitt reveals the outcome of the story even to the spectators that are not familiar with the original Greek saga. On a first glance, the plot of the movie follows directly the plot of the poem *Iliad*. Therefore it is a real surprise to have Menelaus killed in the very beginning of the movie. For everyone familiar with the Homeric poem this killing would deprive the war of its meaning. The common spectator, though, needs that turn in order to strengthen, even to duplicate the motivation for the war for both sides – Greeks and Trojans (Solomon, 2007, p. 486). For the readers of *Iliad* the promise given by Achilles would be sufficient to explain his participation in the war. For a wider (inevitably much wider) audience this life-endangering decision needs to be hardened by additional motivation. Seeking revenge for the dead king Menelaus seems to be a bright idea for that purpose. Close and rigid reading of the *Iliad* would not be of any help for the spectators whose cultural environment does not presume they are familiar with Greek mythology. On the other hand, the personal hostility and the vengeance sought by the hero is an easily comprehensible motive for the plot development, it is, so to speak, a motive of general validity.

Hector kills Menelaus. Source: http://pixshark.com/troy-movie-menelaus.htm

Quite intriguing and purposely misleading casting strategy is to be seen also in another movie implementing ancient story: *Jason and the Argonauts* (2000), produced by Nick Willing, where the role of the Thracian singer Orpheus is played by a black actor. The race change is a shocking decision for the Bulgarian public which is used to considering itself as genetically related to the ancient Thrace and its inhabitants. Of course, no one would ever presume that Orpheus might have been black, but the producer's decision has its grounds which are to be sought outside the narrow historical context.

The producer's decision to present Orpheus black has at least two possible explanations. The first one is the precedent of another movie depicting the singer black: in 1959 Marcel Camus produces the movie *Orfeu Negro* (*Black Orpheus*), awarded the Golden Palm

prize at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival. The screenplay tells the story of a poor Brazilian tram-driver called Orfeu who managed to overcome death with his music talent. Apparently, the personage of Orpheus has not been used in attempt to reconstruct the original myth. It is a merely fictional projection of the Thracian mythological figure. On the other hand, the disturbing race belonging of Willing's Orpheus could be explained in terms of the socially constructed public expectations and preconceived notions. For the – generally speaking – mainly American public, or public influenced by American culture, it is implicitly logical to expect an improvising singer, composing in recitative style to be black. The socially marginalized black artist though does not belong to the common notions of the European audience, especially when it comes to its Eastern Slavonic borderlines. The black Thracian is especially bewildering for the Bulgarian audience which – as mentioned above – claims to have genealogical link to ancient Thracians.

(On the pictures – seriousness and smile: the reconstructed and the projected Orpheus)
http://www.fantastique-arts.com/en/definition-of-orpheus.php/
http://criterioncollection.blogspot.com/2006/01/48-black-orpheus.html

There are, of course, many examples of such implicit producer's hints woven into the scripts of contemporary cinema productions. Most of them just reflect some prejudice (not necessarily in a negative sense) of the audience. According to the Aristotelian principle, the audience identifies itself with the "good" hero – the hero who overcomes all the obstacles and who eventually survives. The suffering of that hero reflects the fears of his/her contemporary time. Among the basic threats in antiquity was, for instance, the danger not to be recognized or acknowledged by your own family – Oedipus case. Among the constant fears of our time are, for example, the world disasters – pictured as an outbreak of a mass epidemic, social or political collision (world wars), or nature catastrophe. In order to free itself from these fears the audience needs the surviving hero. Through him/her every single spectator manages to overcome the disaster and to "stay alive". Although merely fictional the success of the hero is a personal success of the spectator as well and helps him/her to deal with most of the unconscious human fears. The cathartic influence of ancient stories is used also in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans of war (Hardwick, 2013, p. 156).

The hidden allusions in the script could have, naturally, also ideological ground. Apt to illustrate that tendency is the example of the typical barbarians in the cinema (and also in antiquity) – the Persians. During the Cold war several film productions depict them as deprived of rights citizens of an Eastern type totalitarian empire. The existing of such socially and politically inacceptable and intolerable empire endangers – more or less – the civilized world in general (Winkler, 1995, p. 150). The allusion to the satellite-states citizens of the Soviet Union is transparent. Unable to get a proper data from beyond the Iron curtain, the "western public" had its information source in the allegorical scripts of the cinema industry.

The image of the "uncivilized" Persia appeared to be productive also in more recent time. In 2006 Zack Snyder produces "*300*", a thrilling story of the self-sacrifice of Spartan king Leonidas and his soldiers at the narrow pass Thermopylae in Greece. The imagery of the movie is inspired by an eponymous comic book, published in 1998 by Frank Miller. The depiction of Persians and especially of their king Xerxes I in the movie can be described outright as absurd. Among their other characteristics are to be listed the complete lack of ethical principles, excessive greed and shamelessly attested perversion. As for the king himself, Xerxes resembles more a hermaphrodite monster than a person.
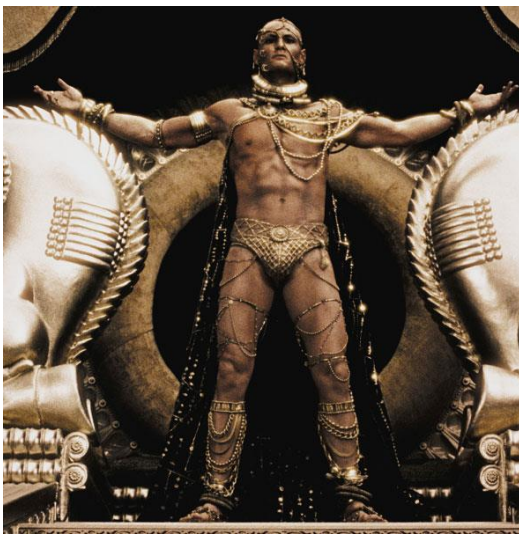

www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/checking_back_in_on_300_uh_oh/
http://www.comicvine.com/xerxes/4005-20966/images/

King Leonidas and king Xerxes I. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:300-_Leonidas_and_Xerxes_discuss_surrender.jpg

The political allusions of the film correspond to its esthetic effects: made obvious in a grotesque way. The traditionally conservative Spartans bravely stand against the almost unhuman East in order to preserve not only their own liberty, but also to guarantee the very core and fundament of the civilization. On their patriotic duty the Spartans are not supported by the Athenians, proverbial democrats, for whom – among the others – they are risking their lives. The unreliable Athenians do not support Spartan troops because it is in their very nature to be selfish: in terms of public duty this means they are not prepared to confront bravely the enemy, in terms of private life it means they are inclined to live luxurious life, dominated by hedonistic desires. Particularly emblematic feature of this luxurious life is the inclination towards different from the common masculine norm sexual preferences. The symbolic line implicitly attached to Athenians include, therefore, in a descending line inclinations towards: democracy, political irresponsibility, fear and homosexuality. Although parodic and exaggerating this analysis could place the movie in the interesting context of the republican – democratic debate and tension in the US. The film was released shortly after the reelecting of President George W. Bush in time of dynamic military affairs, some of which connected to countries in the Middle East. Even if we decide to leave aside the tempting suggestion that the allusions in "*300*" could be

understood in the light of the President's foreign policy, it is inevitable to explain the depiction of the barbarians, of the "others", as a hint to a different culture in its most excessive characteristics. In a sense, the Persians play the role of the uncivilized "others" again in order to compensate the lack of systematic knowledge of the audience and in the attempt to construct a one-dimensional image of the eastern barbarians, i. e. to legitimize the foreign policy considered by someone aggressive.

In the field of classical studies mistakes and deviations from the norm – inaccuracy in translation or transliteration of words – are a fascinating object for every scholar. When it comes to movie screenplays based on ancient history or mythology deviations are as meaningful and interesting as they are in science.

All the commented examples belong to the sphere of the "Tenth Muse" (according to the term of Jean Cocteau). The resources of the cinema industry are incomparably richer than the potential of every other approach to antiquity. The visualization of the epoch facilitates its perception regardless its purposely or by chance misleading character.

Part II Experience Antiquity: War and Wine

In the Bulgarian cultural environment there is no such large-scale artistic form claiming to "reconstruct antiquity". The reception of ancient narratives in the literature is rather sporadic and, therefore, does not play a significant role as a trans-historical intercultural mediator. Non-systematic is also the educational frame of secondary classes on antiquity. During the communism a stress was constantly put on the partly Slavonic origin of Bulgarians. It was not until the fall of the regime when the scholars could conduct their historical and cultural research free from ideological pressure. As a result, many scientific works on ancient Thrace arose in the last decade of the 20th century. The increasing interest in the past of Bulgarian lands provoked also reaction in the field of popular culture.

As a most productive expression of that interest in the past few years we could denote the commemorative reconstructions of ancient practices related to two main topics of general significance for the antiquity – the war and the wine.

There are several carnival reconstructions of Roman battles. The most popular among them is called "Eagle on Danube" and takes place every year near the Roman city of Novae (contemporary city of Svishtov). The city was founded by the VIII Augustan legion in the middle of the 1st century AD and was located on a Danube coast. The festival was established in 2008 and due to its regular character there is a permanently appointed "legion", consisting of volunteers who can be also hired for short visits of other similar commemorational celebrations. This practically means that in Bulgaria we still have "Roman soldiers" "working" on a part-time basis. During the festival different activities are being organized: demonstrations of Roman military tactics, battle staging, lessons of traditional pre-Columbian arts and crafts, etc. The constantly increasing number of participants and spectators from Bulgaria and abroad shows that the festival successfully serves its commercial purposes. http://www.eagleonthedanube.org/2015/index.htm

http://visit.guide-bulgaria.com/a/1322/festival_of_ancient_heritage_eagle_on_the_danube.htm

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"Roman" soldiers of Bulgarian origin. Source: http://svishtov-info.net/news/21976

Senators visiting the Academy of Economics in Svishtov city (4 km. west of Novae). Source: http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=724140

The eternal source of pleasure. Picture:
http://sever.bg/%D0%A0%D0%B8%D0%BC%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-
%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B8-
%D0%BE%D0%BA%D1%83%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0-
%D0%9D%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5_l.a_i.397438.html

This type of carnival celebrations of antiquity in Bulgaria are usually connected to the Roman provinces Moesia Inferior and Thrace. They claim to reconstruct in a relatively authentic way some ancient practices. Apart from the already described festival there are also at least two regularly organized celebrations which take place in Northern Bulgaria – the territory of ancient province Lower Moesia. The location of the festivals is not a coincidence because Lower Moesia was among the most Romanized provinces on the Balkans. Under the constant Greek influence was the other province: Thrace (Southern Bulgaria). Unsurprisingly, the "ancient" celebrations there are mostly related to the ancient Greek cultural heritage, and especially to the Thracian rituals and mythological personages included in them.

As mentioned above, the interest in ancient Thrace dates back to the last decade of the communistic regime and was chiefly bound to mythological figures as, for instance, to Orpheus. The recent archeological discoveries support the ancient testimonies of the richness of Thracian kings. And (again) the gold made many people unable to make a proper distinct between the scientific importance of the discoveries and their almost nationalistic interpretation as a proof of the political and cultural importance of our ancestors. On a deep atavistic level every thesis confirming the power of ancient Thracians is accepted to support the national narrative, attributing significance to the modern heirs of ancient people.

In contrast to the Roman festivals, though, in the celebrations of Thracian heritage the central role is left to… the wine. In the last years the local Neopaganistic rituals in Bulgaria unexceptionally include the god of wine Dionysos.

He is usually accompanied by some Christian saints or traditional folklore personages closely related to wine consumption. In Bulgarian church tradition the patron saint of the vine-growers and wine-consumers is Saint Tryphon the Pruner (celebrated by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on 14th February). In the folklore tradition the saint is associated with the ritual of the first of the year pruning of grape-vines. The agricultural ritual is followed by the ritualistic consumption of wine, taking very often an excessive form in terms of its quantity.

It is easy to draw a direct parallel between the contemporary folklore St. Tryphon feast and the ancient celebrations of Dionysos. The two sacral personages are – to some extend – synonymic in terms of their functions. That is why in the past few years Dionysos became a constant companion of St. Tryphon. Very often the carnival includes also other personages – as for example women in traditional Bulgarian garments, ancient maenads, nymphs, etc. Every now and then "on the stage" of the celebrations appear also Bulgarian kings from the Medieval times.

People celebrating St. Tryphon's day. http://bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/post/100225241/sv-trifon-dionis-i-praznikyt-na-vinoto

Dionysos in Plovid city. Source:http://www.gustonews.bg/?page=article&instanceID=31807

Source: http://www.infotourism.net/index.php?t=10825&m=2

Rhapsodic jam session. Source: http://www.gustonews.bg/?page=article&instanceID=31807

Dionysos, Bacchus, Zagreus, Sabazius and Saint Tryphon in Strumyani village (South-eastern Bulgaria). Between them – a maenad with a copper bowl. Source: http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=664084

http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=1034518

These celebrations are to be described at least as syncretic. The ritual and anachronistic amalgam they offer is kitsch by default. But their condescending evaluation could be moderated through the parallel to the ancient rituals.

In antiquity the ritualistic drunkenness was a distinctive feature of every wine-feast. Ritual games connected with wine were also part of the celebration. Competitions in drinking, obscene dialogues and even participants' misbehavior were a common display of the rituals. Like the contemporary wine-feasts in Bulgaria they were eclectic and fussy.

Nevertheless, their function was to consolidate the society of the celebrating people. The easiest and most intuitive way to achieve and to reconfirm the sense of group identity is to bring into life the common past of the group. Inserting Dionysos and Thracian gods in the celebrations marks the attempt to produce a coherent history of Bulgarian lands. Gaining history means gaining prestige for the group of celebrating people.

What we practically see is put into practice religious pattern attested in the works of Herodotus – the eclectic amalgamation of cults and the identification of foreign divine personages with most familiar local ones. As far as Dionysos has a similar realm of divine prerogatives as the folklore St. Tryphon does, the identification of the two personages is not a surprise. The multiplication of the wine-gods and saints could be extended even more and could include more personages of historical significance regardless the epoch they lived in. Such practices reflect the attempt to produce a coherent history, a significant narrative explaining the past of the society. In that sense they stay close to the cinematographic interpretations of ancient stories. Their carnival character and commercial goal presuppose the inner inconsequence of the divine and historical personages included in the celebrations. Just as the killing of king Menelaus – the amalgamation of fragments and the alteration of the authentic story provide the celebrations a general validity and facilitate its perception by the audience or by the celebrating society.

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