

## ANIMATING ANTIQUITY: INTRODUCTION

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For over half a century, Ray Harryhausen brought a distinctive brand of animation to fantasy films. Among his most memorable creations are the figures from classical mythology – such as skeleton warriors and Medusa – which he constructed for blockbusters like *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *Clash of the Titans* (1981).

Despite the enduring popularity of these creations and the films in which they feature, there has not to date been a focused study of Harryhausen's contribution to the reception of the classical world. Although scholarship on cinematic representations of the classical world has grown apace in the past two decades, Harryhausen's films have been the subject of only intermittent commentary. First and foremost, then, the current volume seeks to plug a significant gap in the current scholarship as well as to stimulate further discussion.

The volume found its genesis as a one-day conference in November 2011. The aim of the conference, the spirit of which has transferred to the selected papers in this volume, was to explore not only the influence of the ancient world on Harryhausen but also the ways in which Harryhausen in his turn has shaped more recent popular imaginings of the classical world. It was no accident that the conference was held as a joint venture between Classics at the University of Leeds and the National Media Museum at Bradford. In 2010, Ray Harryhausen offered his animation collection to the National Media Museum with the expressed wish to preserve it for future generations.<sup>1</sup> And even though the process of relocation will take a number of years, the Museum was able to showcase, at the conference itself, a series of classically themed materials and creature models. Moreover, the conference coincided with the first day of 18<sup>th</sup> Bradford Animation Festival, and the opening event saw a screening of a new and exclusive documentary on Ray Harryhausen in full cinematic surroundings. As a secondary aim, therefore, the current volume seeks to raise awareness of the arrival of the Harryhausen collection to Bradford and to join with the Museum in exciting interest for the Harryhausen brand of classical antiquity in audiences old and new.

To orient the reader, I offer below brief synopses of the papers in this volume:

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones starts proceedings by exploring the ways in which both Ray Harryhausen and scriptwriter Beverley Cross respond thoughtfully to the ancient mythical traditions in their visualisation of the Greek gods in *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Clash of the Titans*. Llewellyn-Jones argues for the filmmakers' meticulous appreciation of the minutiae of the Greek epic model in their presentation of gods who intervene, interfere and often change shape in their interactions with mortals, be it through epiphany, animations of statues or the medium of dreams. Overall, the films' gods betray the same inconsistencies as they do in Greek epic, being at one and the same time both regal lords and mischievous troublemakers, both omnipresent and easily distracted. This is not to say that the adaptation is slavish: on the contrary, Harryhausen and Cross follow cinematic tradition by creating different concepts of time for both heavenly and mortal worlds, a motif absent from Homer.

Continuing the focus on the gods, Stephen Trzaskoma discusses the complex ways in which divine control over human life is visualised in the form of a heavenly gaming board and miniature theatre in *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Clash of the Titans* respectively. Though the concepts are linked, Trzaskoma focuses on the change in emphasis from one film to the other, and explores an intriguing correlation between the figures of Zeus in *Clash of the Titans* and Ray Harryhausen as animator. In *Clash*, Zeus manipulates mortal affairs by means of clay models and figurines within a mini theatre, often against the constraints and interference of other gods. In this way, the creative activities of Zeus can be seen as commentary on the work of Harryhausen himself, a creator who has to struggle against various constraints to produce a storyline, through models, with which he is happy. It is Zeus, therefore, who has a "Harryhausen complex", rather than the other way round.

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<sup>1</sup> For news coverage of the event, see for example the BBC website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10443618>.

Next, Antony Keen identifies a complex network of connections between *Jason and the Argonauts*, *Clash of the Titans*, and the three Sinbad movies of Ray Harryhausen. Such connections suggest that a clear distinction between Greek mythology and other fantasy traditions, while firmly held by many classicists, may be far less obvious to both filmmakers and the general movie-going audience. Keen provides for classicists, therefore, some healthy corrective advice: that one must deepen one's investigation of classical reception by taking on board a wider, cross-cultural pool of cinematic productions.

Eleanor OKell duly obliges in her cross-cultural study of filmic adaptations of the Cyclops. Taking Harryhausen's Cyclops as a starting point (as featured in 7<sup>th</sup> *Voyage of Sinbad*), OKell traces the influence of this visualised monster through a range of subsequent filmic and TV adaptations, with particular attention to the ways in which they bear out the ancient mythical tension as to whether the Cyclops is a barbaric monster or a humane creation worthy of sympathy.

Finally, the papers of Liz Gloyn and Steven Green form a complementary pair, as both set out, and seek to explain the reasons behind, key differences between Harryhausen's 1981 *Clash of the Titans* and the recent, Leterrier 'remake' of the same name (2010). Gloyn explores the connection between monster, landscape and gender in each film, and notes a consistent difference in approach. Whereas the 1981 *Clash* links its monsters with both the sea and the feminine (brought together neatly in the person of the vengeful water goddess Thetis), the 2010 *Clash* opts for a distinctly different setting for its monsters (the 'unreality' of the Underworld) generated from the discernibly male forces of Zeus and Hades. By contrast, Green discusses a major difference in the narrative trajectories of each film. Whereas the 1981 *Clash* centres on Perseus' mythical exploits, the 2010 *Clash* focuses on the more personal issue of Perseus' status as a demi-god, as a liminal figure between the realms of divinity and humanity. Both papers invite reflection on the reasons behind the recent reimagining of a classic mythical film, and both Gloyn and Green identify a range of cultural shifts in the West between 1981 and 2010 to account for the need for a 'refresh'. In particular, the 2010 *Clash* updates the 1981 version in its concerns: to court a video-gaming audience used to a male-centric, goal-driven narrative; to locate the monstrous in an 'otherly' world in order to focus away from 'real' threats in a post-9/11 environment; and to pander to a growing predilection for psychologically-charged split-identity narratives.

Finally, a few acknowledgements are in order. First, I would like to thank the National Media Museum for their collaboration with the conference, an event that was very much enjoyed by all who attended. Particular thanks in this regard are extended to Paul Goodman (Head of Collections and Knowledge), Michael Harvey (Curator of Cinematography), and Deb Singleton (Director of the Bradford Animation Festival). I would also like to thank individuals who gave papers at conference activities leading up to the volume but who were not, for understandable reasons, able to contribute to the volume itself: Brock DeShane (independent film producer, and inventor of the catchy subtitle for the conference), Helen Lovatt, Dunstan Lowe and Gideon Nisbet. I would also like to express my gratitude to Trevor Fear for offering the Open University's *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* as a venue for the publication, and to the various people involved in helping to shape the finished volume, including the OU's anonymous reader. Finally, I would like to thank Tony Dalton, co-author with and long-standing friend of Ray Harryhausen, who attended the conference and shared the emerging papers with Ray himself, who I understand was flattered, if a little perplexed, to hear that his filmic work was being scrutinised by professional classicists. It goes without saying that the views and ideas expressed in these papers are not necessarily those shared by either Ray or Tony – such is the rich interpretative potential of Harryhausen's enduring brand of classical mythology.

It was with great sadness that we learnt of Ray Harryhausen's death during the production of this volume (May 2013), and we trust that the volume will count as a small tribute to the man who quite literally animated antiquity for generations of viewers.

SJG, November 2013