

[R E V I E W]

FILIPPO CARLÀ-UHINK, review of Thomas E. Jenkins, *Antiquity Now. The Classical World in the Contemporary American Imagination*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge 2015), viii & 253 S. ISBN: 978-0-521-19626-0, 67 £ and **review of** Ute Schüren, Daniel Marc Segesser, Thomas Späth (Eds.), *Globalized Antiquity. Uses and Perceptions of the Past in South Asia, Mesoamerica and Europe*. Reimer (Berlin 2015), 352 S. ISBN: 978-3-496-01600-7, 45 €, in *thersites* 5 (2016) 150-158.



Rezension:

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The growing success of studies on Classical Receptions, the Classical Tradition, Classical Transformations, Uses of the Classical, and all other definitions which have been given to describe, circumscribe, categorize forms of survival of Antiquity into later periods has still not really managed to break their almost exclusive focus – partly because of the origin and linguistic knowledge of their practitioners – on the Global North, and more particularly on Western Europe. A greater openness can be found in studies about the uses of archaeology (because of the necessary confrontation, in the field, with the areas in which the excavations take place), and to some specific realities – generally those which are popular and appealing also to a Western and mostly European public. The most relevant case is the Japanese production of anime and manga, whose connections with Classical Antiquity has indeed been at least in part the object of scholarly publications.¹

Interestingly enough, the huge concentration on film as medium and vehicle of Classical Receptions has drawn the attention of the scholars of this field regularly towards Hollywood, and generally American forms of reception are widely known and broadly studied – very often, though, they are

1 E.g. A. Hernández Reyes, „Los mitos griegos en el manga japonés“, in P. Castillo / S. Knippschild / M. García Morcillo / C. Herreros (Hg.), *Imágenes. La Antigüedad en las Artes Escénicas y Visuales*, Logronyo 2008, 633-644; M. G. Castello / C. Scilabra, „Theoi Becoming Kami: Classical Mythology in the Anime World“, in F. Carlà / I. Berti (Hg.), *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts*, London 2015, 177-196.

compared with European products without really questioning whether the presence of Classical Antiquity in the US (and in Canada) is comparable to that in Europe. While there have been studies explicitly directed to investigating the presence of Antiquity, and mostly Rome, in American culture, not much has been done to highlight what is specifically American in such forms of reception. The role of Classicism, of ancient constitutional models in the American revolution and the very beginning of the new state has been highlighted, in works sometimes of very high quality² – still, a complete reflection on how such relevance, and the architectural expressions of it, for instance in the Nashville Parthenon, has differentiated itself, over the centuries, from the European Classicism (and the direct contact with the archaeological material, which is available only on this side of the Atlantic) has yet to come.

Indeed, the specific cultural, social and political experience of the United States has attributed values to Classical Antiquity that are barely recognizable in Europe, for instance in connection with the themes of citizenship and migration, or of race and integration.³ A first thorough analysis of the meaning of the Classical in American imagination is now provided, though, by Jenkins' monograph *Antiquity Now*, published in 2015. With a book written in a very pleasant style and accessible to a broader public, including scholars of many different academic fields, Jenkins provides an extremely valuable and stimulating overview of the ways the Classics were “used” and “activated” in different fields and in relation to different topics. The volume is organized along themes for which Classical Antiquity appeared at some stage relevant: after an introduction, which efficiently and clearly summarizes the problematic terminology and the theoretical background of concepts such as the Classical Tradition and Classical Reception, the book moves to investigate how ancient literature was functionalized at different stages in reference to gay and lesbian rights, ideology, 9/11 and terrorism, identity and community, feminism and ecology. This is a good choice of sample topics, which hopefully will open the way to similar analyses in other fields. Jenkins' main

2 E.g. M. Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America*, Chichester 2009; T. Frank, “From Republican to Imperial. The Survival and Perception of Antiquity in American Thought”, in G. Klaniczay / M. Werner / O. Gecser (Hg.), *Multiple Antiquities – Multiple Modernities. Ancient History in Nineteenth Century European Cultures*, Frankfurt / New York 2011, 479-497.

3 See now M. Malamud, *African Americans and the Classics: Antiquity, Abolition, and Activism*, London 2016 – reviewed in this same issue of *thesites* by A. Rosbach.

arguments, which emerge vividly from the book, are twofold: that there is no “universal validity” of Classical literature and art – this is no explanation of their survival and success; on the contrary, the Classics emerge and re-emerge in clear and definite connection to specific debates and themes to which they become and are made relevant. They appear, in substance, when they are useful to clarify and reinforce particular points of view, often in a political sense. As Jenkins writes: “classical reception is a study of ideology, not of medium per se. This multiplicity of media sometimes makes reception a particularly slippery field of studies: one never quite knows when, where, and how the classical world will make a startling contemporary appearance” (p. 159).

The second aspect, too often forgotten, is that the Classics can be “activated” by opposing parties – and indeed have been: they represent thus a contested field, always open to reinterpretation, and not a repertoire of themes and values which regularly recur in the same fashion and with the same meanings. Jenkins exclusively concentrates on the reception of ancient literature, and of visual and material culture, or of law and norms – but it is a pity that his chapter on gay and lesbian rights does not recall the famous *Evans v. Romer* trial of 1993. The problem of the legitimacy of Amendment 2 to the Colorado constitution suddenly transformed into a debate on Plato – more particularly on his *Laws*: could Plato be used as a demonstration that there is, in Western thought, a string of tradition which is against homosexuality, but out of civic and not religious motives? To the trial were thus summoned John Finnis, Professor of Law and Legal Philosophy at Oxford, and Martha Nussbaum, Professor of Classics at Brown.⁴ This is a perfect example in support of Jenkins’ book, showing one philosophical text from Classical Antiquity which all of a sudden emerges from the ivory tower, becomes central to a legal decision impacting the lives of thousands of people and being “used” or rather pulled in two opposite directions.

Jenkins operates within a radical, and sometimes narrow, selection of works – in this way, his book reaches a great depth of analysis for the individual works considered and manages to avoid becoming a simple list of reception forms, and the reasons for his choices are apparent and generally persuasive. Only at a few points is the reader baffled or would have pre-

4 R. B. Clark, „Platonic Love in a Colorado Courtroom: Martha Nussbaum, John Finnis, and Plato’s *Laws* in *Evans v. Romer*”, *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 12, 2000, 1-38.

ferred more explanation. This happens in particular where Jenkins, in spite of the subheading “The Classical World in the Contemporary American Imagination”, chooses examples which come from outside the US. While in some cases (Seamus Heaney’s *Burial at Thebes*, for example) these appear to be comments on US politics from outside made through references to Classics, as revealed by the title of one chapter, “September 11th on the Western Stage” (but still, the relevance of such a take on American Politics on American Imagination is not self-evident), this is not always the case. Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* is thoroughly analyzed (pp. 191-201), but there is no reference to her being Canadian; no other Canadian example is considered in the volume; and no reflection (which might be very useful) on whether Canadian reception of Classical Antiquity is different from the US American one.

Thus, Jenkins’ book does not provide, except indirectly (nor was it the intention of the author), a clear explanation of the specific characters of Classical Receptions in America; still he definitely provides readers with abundant food for thought in this direction, proposing a huge variety of products which show “the continuing negotiation of classical antiquity as a precursor – or metaphor – for American society itself” (p. 8), and revealing how present antiquity is in contemporary American mentality. The book’s great strength derives also from Jenkins’ ability to move competently and elegantly among the most diverse media – novel, theatre production, comic, TV series, etc. – to present readers with a kaleidoscopic view of the subjects: it is this refraction, recomposition and recombination of a given number of (ancient) material which produces, in the end, fascinating and almost infinite patterns Jenkins so ably describes. At the same time, a great merit of the book is the presentation and combination of a huge number of “products of reception” which range from the most famous (as Eric Shanower’s *Age of Bronze*)⁵ to the very hidden, from the accessible ones (as publications) to ephemeral performances, thus providing the scholars with a range of otherwise inaccessible material.

5 Curiously, Jenkins does not reference the two articles that Shanower wrote about his work and about his “relationship” with the Classics: E. Shanower, “Twenty-First-Century Troy”, in G. Kovacs / C. W. Marshall (Hg.), *Classics and Comics*, Oxford 2011, 195-206; E. Shanower, “Trojan Lovers and Warriors: The Power of Seduction in *Age of Bronze*”, in S. Knippschild / M. García Morcillo (Hg.), *Seduction and Power. Antiquity in the Visual and Performing Arts*, London / New York 2013, 57-70.

A systematic work on the American approach to Classics would not be possible to deal with in the format of one monograph, as mentioned, and would require a still broader set of media to investigate (advertising is for instance missing), as well as an investigation of non-literary ancient materials in their continuous transformations and re-appearances, but Jenkins' book is definitely a very important first step of very high quality towards that aim.

But what about the other regions of the world? In a context of increased and increasing globalization, in which some stories and visual models are always more widespread (one can think of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, which provided a clear visual model for the Roman Empire recognizable throughout the world), what character does Antiquity – and Classical Antiquity in particular – assume in areas outside the Western world and the Global North? It would be urgently necessary to face the question whether the globalization model provides a relevant instrument to understand the interest towards and the uses of Classical Antiquity in different parts of the world, or whether the glocalization model would be rather more appropriate in identifying the national, regional, cultural nuances which are applied every time to the ancient characters and motifs which, to quote Jenkins one last time, pop up at unexpected moment in unexpected places, as in a sort of Whac-a-Mole game (p. 20).

The second volume discussed here, titled *Globalized Antiquity*, does not discuss this, though – the Antiquity which is analyzed here in its globalization is not Classical Antiquity, but the very concept of Antiquity itself. The editors start from the assumption that “the construction of antiquity beyond Europe has remained largely uninvestigated” (p. 15) and act upon Chakrabarty's imperative to “provincialize Europe”. It is at this point, though, that the book would have required more coherence and a stronger or more explicit theoretical background. In the conclusions to the volume it is argued that antiquity as such is “a product of nineteenth-century Europe – and classical antiquity even more so” (T. Späth, p. 320). But not only is this view not demonstrated by the volume, but it is actually contradicted by the same author a few pages later, when Späth claims that “the rich diversity of pasts plainly suggests that subject to particular historical and cultural conditions (and needs) every present age produces its own ‘antiquity’” (p. 325) and again when he highlights how “such a comparative study reveals the concept of an idealized past as a common feature of the geographical regions and historical periods discussed in the present volume” (p. 326).

Many chapters within the book are also in clear contradiction with the former statement: the first one, for instance, by Romila Thapar, is a cogent demonstration that the widespread idea that traditional Indian civilizations (before colonization) lacked a sense of history is dramatically wrong, and that the past was functionalized and used to create identity and legitimate power much before the British arrived to the sub-continent.

This does not mean that Späth is “wrong”, but that there is quite a lack of definition of what is meant, in the volume, by “Antiquity”, or more particularly by “Classical Antiquity”. Such a definition is provided in one chapter by Jakob Rösel on “The Concept of a Classical Age in India’s Contemporary Politics” (pp. 93-125), which is one of the best and most interesting contributions to the volume. Rösel (who explicitly argues that the concept of a Classical Age has existed since the ancient world) insists on how every reworking of history requires a consensus, a “schoolbook history”, around which new meanings and new values can be mediated. In this sense, Classicism is constructed when a condensed version, an ideal type of the nation’s or the group’s history is realized, which projects back into a past Golden Age values and norms which one wants to be of inspiration today. In this sense the “Classical” cannot be primordial, as it requires a narrative of growth to a peak of civilization.

So, while the volume as a whole opens up for discussion – and does so in a very timely fashion – an extremely important and interesting set of question about what is “ancient”, what is “classical”, and whether some forms of looking back at the past and “functionalizing” it for the present are a Western creation which expanded to the rest of the world through colonization, it does this in an unsystematic manner, failing to provide central definitions which could unify the contributions around a core of concepts. At some points, the volume also discusses the relevance and the appropriation of Western “Classical Antiquity” in other contexts. This is a completely different field, as mentioned, which would require volumes and volumes of its own, especially in connection with a reality such as India, where British colonialism and the establishment of British educational institutions – along with the ways in which reflections on the British Empire at that time often took the form of comparisons with Rome (for instance in Lord Curzon’s works) – generated a strong knowledge of the Greek and Roman Classical among the educated elites, while at the same time the mentions of India in Graeco-Roman sources and in ancient history could influence public and political discourse about the Empire. Daniel Segesser’s considerations on the

ways in which British scholars of the early colonial period used history in the construction and strengthening of colonial rule, interpreting earlier Indian history through the lens of Western ancient history, and most notably of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, thus provide very stimulating information which barely connects with the other chapters of the volume.

The book is arranged in three parts, dedicated to three different geographical areas. Consistent with the main spirit of the book, Europe is left to the last – though it still *is* included. The first section is dedicated to India – the aforementioned contributions are joined by studies of how the past was constructed in the time of the Delhi Sultanate and of the Mughal Empire (again, which antiquity?), to the role of architecture in “materializing” and constructing history. The second section deals with Mesoamerica, and moves in a very heterogeneous way from a chapter dealing with the conception of time in pre-Columbian societies, to the uses of past in the moment of the creation of the nation of Mexico in the 19th century, to a *j'accuse* against colonial appropriations of indigenous identity, to a history of archaeological research in Mexico, to the ways in which indigenous population approached the archaeological ruins in their areas and in which sense they consider them as parts of their “cultural heritage”.

Again, all these chapter provide extremely valuable stimuli for reflection and discussion, highlighting for instance how early scholarship on the Maya felt the unconscious need to periodize their history in a Pre-Classical, a Classical and a Post-Classical (meant as Decadence) time, thus replicating a very European way of understanding civilizations, which is mostly based on the Roman Empire. At the same time, these chapters reveal the difficulties intrinsic in the question “whose antiquity?” – in a context such as Mexico, in which the experience of colonization has left a very complex layering of ethnic and cultural identities and huge problems of marginalization and discrimination of “indigenous” (i.e. non-creole) people. Indeed, Mesoamerica, and particularly the so-called “Maya Riviera”, provides a very fruitful context for the investigation of the forms in which “Antiquity”, in this case in the shape of material culture, has been used at different stages by different groups as foundational towards the reinforcement of identity and of political cultures, but also as an economic resource allowing the development of

tourism and the realization of infrastructures and work opportunities – an element which is here only very partially considered.⁶

The final section, dedicated to Europe, is also by far the least consistent one. It is true that the reception of Classical Antiquity in Europe is far from being an under-investigated field of research – but as the point would be to draw a comparison with the forms of “uses of the past” and “interpretations of the past” in the two other regions, it would have been needed to concentrate the attention of those few aspects which would have allowed to better “deprovincialize” the concept of European Antiquity. Actually, it is also a bit much to have called this section “European ‘Classical Antiquity’”, as one chapter dealing with Greek and Roman history is followed by two on Germany and German culture in the 19th century.

The three contributions of this section, which is the shortest one, therefore analyze three very different aspects, starting from how ruins and monuments were conceived, conceptualized and described IN (and not FROM!) Classical Antiquity, and showing how the “poetic of ruins” developed only within the Roman culture (Alain Schnapp, “The Path of Ruins in the Graeco-Roman World”, pp. 259-279). The second chapter (Manuel Baumbach, “Füssli, Schlegel, and Lucian: A ‘True Story’ about Late Eighteenth-Century Fragmented Antiquity”, pp. 281-296) is an oddly perplexing essay which investigates the ways in which Romanticism (here illustrated by Füssli and Schlegel) created the aesthetical notion of the fragment in opposition to “classical perfection” and compares it with Lucian’s way of not-finishing the *True Histories*, before finally concluding his argument by highlighting the difference between Romantic finitude (and desperation) and Lucian’s ironic creativity.

Finally, Stefan Rebenich’s thorough analysis of the study of Greek history in the German educational system in the 19th century and the nature of “bourgeois antiquity” which humanist education attributed to it (pp. 297-316), is a valuable contribution to the on-going debate on German philhellenism – indeed the ways in which such admiration for Greece influenced the school system is an important topic, which becomes particularly relevant when the “Athenian” model of freedom and education of the individual

6 See, among others, C. J. Walker, *Heritage or Heresy: Archaeology and Culture on the Maya Riviera*, Tuscaloosa 2009.

elaborated by Wilhelm von Humboldt gives way to the “Spartan” model of the military education of the Second and Third Reich.⁷

It is impossible to discuss here in detail every chapter – some of which are of extremely high quality and will constitute important reference points in future discussions of what a genuinely postcolonial study of the reception of Antiquities (intentionally plural) should look like; and in this respect, it is a pity that this volume as a whole represents something of a missed opportunity. Nevertheless, both books discussed here should be considered important and relevant first step towards a more differentiated and layered understanding of the reception and transformation of Antiquity and of the Classical, be it the Graeco-Roman one in its globalized and glocalized appearances or the past which is relevant to each specific cultural context, opening the way to a bigger consciousness of what is sometimes an ill-reflected application of Eurocentric categories.

⁷ See H. Roche, *Sparta's German Children: The Ideal of Ancient Sparta in the Prussian Royal Cadet Corps, 1818-1920, and in National Socialist Elite Schools (the Napolas), 1933-1945*, London 2013.