INTRODUCTION

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> The first two decades of the twenty-first century
> unequivocally belong to the series. Their influence
> on the modes of telling the story of the world (and
> therefore on our way of understanding that story, too)
> is revolutionary.
>
> Olga Tokarczuk, *Nobel Lecture*[1]

Stories! We crave them, we seek them, we cannot live without them. Called "a pervasive and perpetual human characteristic, like language, like play,"[2] they appeared when sentient life and cognition began. Survival instincts, inevitably, fuelled first non-verbal, then verbal communication; sharing what was known – facts – and then, what was imagined – fiction. In the ancient caves of Chauvet, Arcy-sur-Cure, Lascaux, Altamira, Greater Sunda Islands, and in hundreds of other places, engraved, painted, and carved images of prehistoric animals, humans, and therianthropic figures preserve powerful and mysterious visual stories. Most of them were discovered only in the twentieth century; they still remain enigmatic and are only superficially decoded. Judging by the sophistication of the images,[3] the language skills of that period must have been significantly

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* Due to the nature of the material analysed in this volume, the Author chose to replace the series' editorial style sheet with a system adapted to the content.

[1] The phrase "unequivocally belong to," kindly suggested by Henry Stead, improves the original translation (Tokarczuk, 2019).

[2] A.S. Byatt, in her 2004 article in *The Guardian*, republished the same year, as the introduction to Maria Tatar's edition of *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*.

[3] "They've invented everything!" allegedly exclaimed Pablo Picasso after a visit to the Lascaux cave in 1940. This statement has been frequently quoted in various versions (see J. Jones, 2021), but without a confirmed source. If the assumption of neuroscientists that "complex language and sophisticated tool use and manufacture emerged at roughly the same time" (Lamm, 2014, 281) is valid, the high level of painting skills and tools apparent in cave art indicates that the cave artists were using a relatively sophisticated language.

complex,[4] reaching well beyond a simple exchange of basic information. Prehistoric cave art offers the first surviving manifestations of non-verbal storytelling. The hunting scene preserved in a cave on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi (Celebes) constitutes "the oldest [over 40 thousand years old] evidence for the communication of a narrative," while "the ability to invent fictional stories may have been the last and most crucial stage in the evolutionary history of human language and the development of modern-like patterns of cognition" (Aubert et al., 2019, 442).[5] At that time, *Homo narrans* was born.[6]

As life evolved, the need to share stories shaped storytelling modes, making them gradually more intricate, in parallel to the growing complexity of human existence. Stories had been ordering and explaining the surrounding world before science took over this never-ending task. However, there are areas of reality inaccessible to scientific methods. They continue to be interpreted from the individual perspective of storytellers, which, more than science, contributes to the awareness of what it might mean to be human. This process is necessarily

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[4] According to evolutionary (Darwinist) psychology, "language evolved gradually from pre-existing cognitive capacities, contrary to the view of Chomsky and others that language and symbolic thought emerged abruptly, in a single step, within the past 100,000 years" (Corballis, 2013, 1). William Deresiewicz (2009) delivered a scathing critique of evolutionary psychology and its tendency to neglect contradictory evidence. He used as examples of literary Darwinists Joseph Carroll, Jonathan Gottschall, Denis Dutton, and Brian Boyd, best known as an expert on Vladimir Nabokov. Twelve years later, Elias Garcia-Pelegrin, Clive Wilkins, and Nicola S. Clayton (2021) reviewing the abundant and fascinating history of scholarship related to the evolution of language and storytelling skills, ignored Deresiewicz's arguments but highlighted the fact that the ideal suitability of language for storytelling did not preclude the existence of storytelling "prior to the evolution of language." Boyd, whom Deresiewicz calls "a clearer and more careful thinker than most of these other writers," states in a later paper that "humans almost from birth have story-craving minds" (2017). Jack Zipes, in his 2010 review of Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, joins Deresiewicz's negative assessment of literary Darwinism and criticizes Boyd for inexplicable exclusion from his study of folk and fairy tales, "myths, legends, and other short narratives" (Zipes, 2010, 152–161). Deresiewicz's and Zipes's criticisms do not detract from the enjoyment of following Boyd's reasoning, heavily coloured by his fascination with Homer, in the chapter "From Zeus to Seuss: Origins of Stories" (Boyd, 2009, 209–379). A similar opinion was expressed by Mathias Clasen (2012, 430–431) in his review of Boyd's 2009 book.

[5] It seems intuitively right that hunting tales are among the first surviving fictional narratives as even today they retain their notoriously exaggerated and quasi-fictional character. I find particularly impressive the ritually overstated records of hunting successes in the royal Assyrian inscriptions, e.g., Assurdan II (934–912 BCE) allegedly killed 120 lions, Adad-nirari II (911–891 BCE) three times as many – 360, Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) – 450 lions and 390 wild bulls, while Salmanasar III (858–824 BCE) boasted of killing 399 lions and 373 wild bulls (Bauer, 1933, 87–88; Cassin, 1981, 377–379; Olechowska, 2011, 275).

[6] The term *Homo narrans* was coined by the German ethnologist Kurt Ranke (1908–1985); see Uther, 2003, 146.

dynamic: people evolve, and their conditions change, and so do the stories mirroring people's environment, beliefs, needs, aspirations, and fears. In today's world, the crucial functions of stories include their ability to attract, captivate, and entertain readers, listeners, and viewers as well as satisfy the universally experienced hunger for narration; they are also expected to produce a deeply felt sensation of pleasure, a commodity in high demand.

Among many recent publications intended for non-specialists about how the brain works in relation to stories, two seem rather illuminating. The first, published in 2012, is a discussion of the theory of storytelling by Jonathan Gottschall supported by psychological and neuroscientific studies, among them research on brain scans observed during consumption of fiction and assessments of the command of social skills displayed by heavy consumers of fiction. When people consume stories, whether by listening, reading, or watching, they virtually transfer to fictional worlds and experience what the protagonists of these stories go through. Stories create and strengthen neural pathways required for appropriate reactions to challenges that may and do occur in real life. Bringing up the analogy of the flight simulator, a widely used and effective method of pilot training, Gottschall compares in the chapter "To Simulate Is to Do" consuming stories to a "life simulator," a safe method of exposing people to a wealth of virtual life experience and allowing them to face challenging dilemmas complete with solutions and related consequences (Gottschall, [2012] 2013, 59–67). The book focuses on the idea, highlighted also in the title,[7] that storytelling is the *differentia specifica* of the human species.

The second publication is the 2021 book by Angus Fletcher, entitled *Wonderworks: Literary Inventions and the Science of Stories*. It takes the reader on an easy stroll through forty-three centuries of literary texts, secure in the crucial importance of stories as corroborated by recent neuroscientific advances.[8] Fletcher, a neuroscientist doubling as a literary scholar, talks about human brains "being primarily narrative" and containing "action centers" powerfully affected and mobilized by stories that explain the world and illuminate challenges people face – "the problem of being human in a nonhuman world" (2021, 7). Stories "fix hearts and lift souls"; in their literary manifestation, they are:

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[7] *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*.
[8] See also Raju Narisetti's interview with Fletcher, April 29, 2021, in McKinsey's "Author Talks" series, available online.

> a narrative-emotional technology that helped our ancestors cope with the psychological challenges posed by human biology. It was an invention for overcoming the doubt and the pain of just being us. […] It can still reckon with death and unshatter the psyche. It can still give us the stuff past the stars and the meaning immortal. (Fletcher, 2021, 9)

Throughout recorded history, stories have covered an infinite diversity of themes encompassing all that is, was, could, and could not be. Storytellers have been responding to the double challenge of providing relevant content and ensuring memorable performance: what to say and how to say it best, striving to achieve an optimal balance between their own needs and desires and the delight of their audiences, including their patron/sponsor. While the means available to storytellers multiplied and evolved, at times dramatically, the creative challenge, on the basic psychological level, remained the same. An ancient ἀοιδός (*aoidós*), a Hellenistic (or Byzantine) romance writer, a Celtic bard, a French *trouvère* or *jongleur*, a (*mutatis mutandis*) mendicant preacher of any order using in his sermons *exempla*, bestiaries, and lives of saints, an author of frame stories, of short stories, of fairy tales, of novels serialized in periodicals, creators of radio and television series, they all have dealt with different but largely comparable issues typical for the art and business of episodic narration in any era.

The relationship between the story, storyteller, and story recipient does not develop in a vacuum. It is shaped by "environmental" forces, such as, for instance, a wealthy patron's preference for a specific content, provision (availability) of space and time for telling the story, and the ear/eye readiness of the recipient. These are basically social, economic, and cultural factors that evolve and change from period to period, situating stories within their background and, at the same time, providing a 360° view of the phenomenon. The divide between active storytellers and passive story recipients has never been a strict dichotomy. Storytellers must learn their craft by listening to stories told by others. Once they master storytelling, they regularly revert to being recipients to broaden their repertory and improve their technique as well as satisfy their own hunger for stories. Active reception or appropriation of older stories is an obvious mechanism of storytellers' professional development and also a source of inspiration for content and form.

The first creative contact with narration occurs in early childhood, coinciding with the acquisition of language skills. Malcolm Gladwell's international bestseller

The Tipping Point[9] brought to the attention of a wider public the *Narratives from the Crib* (Nelson, [1989] 2006), a research project published in 1989 and conducted by Katherine Nelson, a developmental psychologist at Harvard University. It was based on 122 recordings (made over fifteen months) of stories Emily Oster, a two-year-old child, told herself before falling asleep. Inspired by an earlier study (Weir, 1962), this one revealed the importance of stories in early childhood manifested in monologues, crib speech, bed-time rituals essential in ordering reality, and specifically, in digesting real-life experience and recreating the world through narrative.[10] For Emily, storytelling was a tool that organized whatever happened on a given day in her life and expressed her expectations of what would and should happen the following day.[11] Children's dependence on stories, as creators and recipients, follows them into adulthood. The human need for stories, experienced by active creators or intellectually and emotionally engaged recipients, relies on imagination and familiarity with stories told in the past, often repeatedly, with or without variations. This need has always been with us during the millennia of human development and the entire lifespan of each human being. "Humans seem to have an adaptive predisposition for inventing, telling and consuming stories" (Aubert et al., 2019, 442).

In each period of history, this need has been satisfied by narratives well grounded in the corresponding reality. The television series became the privileged way to tell stories in the late twentieth century, initially sharing this position with film. In the twenty-first century, it left film behind. It multiplied its distribution platforms, becoming available on DVD, the Web, and international streaming services, watched on various screens, including computers and ubiquitous smartphones. This gradual departure from television as the leading distribution platform is reflected in recently favoured new terminology – audiovisual series or scripted show instead of television series (or serial). The position of the film has been somewhat blurred, first by theatrical movies being shown on television and then with the advent of the new platforms becoming available to watch for a fraction of the ticket price anytime and almost anywhere.

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[9] Gladwell ([2000] 2009, 118–121) discusses the success of the television show *Sesame Street* achieved through "the brilliance of its writing and the warmth and charisma of the Muppets," in spite of its neglect of narrative, "the most important of all ways of reaching young children" (121).

[10] See especially Chapter 1, authored by Nelson, and Chapter 2, written by Jerome Bruner and Joan Lucariello (Nelson, [1989] 2006, 27–97).

[11] The book was published again, seventeen years later, with a foreword by the grown-up Emily Oster herself, now an economist at Brown University (Nelson, [1989] 2006, v–vii; Tkaczyk, 2020, 149).

The view expressed by a recognized mistress of the narrative craft high-lights the cognitive interpretation of human experience as a perennial function of narration. It encourages us to take a look back at the origins and development of post-oral storytelling as closely interconnected with the social and cultural evolution of *Homo sapiens*. In her Nobel Prize acceptance lecture on December 7, 2019, Olga Tokarczuk talked about "a wholly new way of telling the world's story" developed in audiovisual series but practised already well over 2,000 years ago "in the myths and Homeric tales." When great writers share their insights about storytelling, scholars should pay attention and confront creators' thoughts with their own.

Contrary to the crib stories of the two-year-old Emily, stories presented in television series are rarely true; even those offering authentic or historical events are fictionalized for various reasons. Emily's narratives had cognitive and developmental functions. Fans of audiovisual shows look at stories differently than either Emily or Philip Pullman's evil harpies, who valued truth and authenticity so much that they agreed to show the ghosts the way out of the land of the dead in exchange for true stories.[12] Twenty-first-century viewers primarily want to be entertained, even though, depending on the series' genre, scripted shows assume quite a few additional functions and values, including cognitive, developmental, and cultural.

After over seventy years of existence, television reached significant levels of complexity in some of its productions, and along with popular culture in general, acquired the approval of psychologists and cultural scholars. Traditional criticisms and accusations of low standards and mediocrity have been toned down, and the positive effects of watching television have been discussed and accepted since the late twentieth century. Steven Johnson's 2005 bestseller, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, is the result of this change of perspective. Similar reasoning more specifically targeting television serials was offered by Jennifer Hayward in her 1997 book, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*. This evolution of scholarly attitudes towards television is discussed at length in the 2017 insightful collective volume *Media of Serial Narrative* edited by Frank Kelleter. He calls serialization a storytelling practice

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[12] In Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, people need stories even after they die. The new task and *modus operandi* is given to the Harpies by Lyra, who says that they will now "guide the ghosts from the landing place by the lake all the way through the land of the dead to the new opening out into the world. In exchange, they will tell you [the Harpies] their stories as a fair and just payment for this guidance" (Pullman, [1995, 1997, 2000] 2017, 782).

in popular-culture media. He analyses seriality in literature, film, and television venturing into non-English language productions, offering quite a few such examples, mainly German. Kelleter succinctly describes the foundation of the hunger for narration saying: "two basic impulses of storytelling – the satisfaction of conclusion and the appeal of renewal – are balanced through suspense and resolution" (Kelleter, 2017a, 9; see also Denson, 2011).

Like television in general, series have often been contemptuously dismissed as commercially driven popular entertainment for the masses, emphasizing their commercial rather than entertainment potential. In consequence, they were readily denied the status of an art form. Their omnipresence, success, and undeniable appeal appear suspicious to scholars, an attitude that carries seeds of patronizing criticism. Television series have been accused of lacking artistic values and originality, to say nothing of the nefarious, addictive impact on personality and causing mental disorders among the susceptible *hoi polloi* of all ages. Popular culture in general, and, specifically, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, saw the low opinion and contempt for the series gradually reverse.[13] Several impressive productions gained unanimous praise from viewers, critics, and scholars.[14] Prime-time television series, and more recently series produced by streaming services, tell long, complex, and absorbing stories, able to involve and connect viewers better than movies, even those produced as cycles.

The What, Why, and How of the Volume

A cultural scholar with a strong background in both Classics and media naturally tends to look for areas where these disciplines meet and observes the dynamics of such encounters. Having researched for several years classical inspirations in all types of texts for adolescents and young adults,[15] I realized that my fasci-

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[13] The first widely popular television series which fascinated scholars, launched the first wave of academic interest, and found a place in university curricula was the 1997–2003 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. See also the PhD dissertation by Nandita Dutta (2020), based on Angela Ndalianis's theory of screen and entertainment media.

[14] The examples most frequently quoted here are *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *The Shield*, *Deadwood*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *House of Cards* (Hilmes et al., 2014, 26 et passim; Goodlad, 2018, 869–870; Kelleter, 2017b).

[15] See my papers, written for Katarzyna Marciniak's European Research Council project, where I discuss these themes in *Harry Potter* novels (2016), Joann Sfar's comic books (2020d), both editions of the *Clash of the Titans* – 1981 and 2010 – (2020a), Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz's

nation with television series could be channelled with a reasonable expectation of success into a study of the genre focusing on a specific time period and limited to shows in some ways inspired by Greek and Roman mythology. Results of the 2015–2022 European Research Council (ERC) project *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* provide a natural launching pad for such an endeavour. *Our Mythical Childhood*'s research targets all cultural texts inspired by Classical Antiquity and addressed to children, young adults, and their so-called crossover publics. The present inquiry constitutes a logical and promising avenue for classical reception studies targeting specifically audiovisual series, provided that most if not all such productions were identified and acknowledged.

My approach to the genre concurs with Tokarczuk's broad vision of the time-honoured survival and evolution of storytelling and with the scholarly obligation to recognize and study this legacy. It has been the cornerstone of my enthralment with the phenomenal appeal and power of attraction demonstrated by television series across all contemporary cultures and generations of viewers. Like any riveting tale, the story of today's audiovisual series would benefit from investigating its origins. The goal would be to determine what kind of storytelling had satisfied the human need for stories during the long centuries before the advent of television. Accordingly, Chapter 1 of the present study, entitled **"The Audiovisual Series: A Prequel,"** provides a chronological and analytical review of narrative genres sharing the same essential (but not the only) function of delighting and entertaining the public. Readers may approach the chapter as a rite of passage to better understand how oral storytelling (which already encompassed visual elements) became recorded in writing and finally achieved its currently dominant form of serialized audiovisual narrative. Observing the historical evolution of this kind of storytelling from antiquity to the present day may illuminate the reason why television series effortlessly stepped into the millennia-long process of satisfying human hunger for compelling stories.[16]

The sheer number of television series produced in the twenty-first century across languages and cultures defy an individual scholar's attempt at fully grasping the phenomenon and impose a reduction of the scope of research

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Once Upon a Time (2021), *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (forthcoming a), Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and *The Book of Dust* (forthcoming b), and in various entries in the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* (e.g., on the BBC *Atlantis* and on Nick Willing's *Olympus*).

[16] See Martin M. Winkler's *Classical Literature on Screen: Affinities of Imagination* (2017, 1–4), on the genealogy of storytelling.

to a manageable perspective. Scholars naturally focus on series from their cultural areas, in parallel with shows in English, which account for most of the current global production[17] and constitute the main research material for the present study. In the tenth-anniversary edition of *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman wondered how he, an Englishman, dared to write about America, its soul, and gods. He came to the conclusion that it was a question of necessity: he had no choice (Gaiman, [2001] 2011, 539). *Mutatis mutandis*, I am asking myself a similar question: how does someone for whom English is a second (or third) language feel justified in analysing mainly American and British audiovisual series, undoubtedly missing countless allusions and intertextual references incomprehensible to a non-native speaker? Unsurprisingly, my answer is the same as Gaiman's. I had no choice if I really wanted to understand this genre's dominion over the twenty-first-century favourite screens. Waiting for those culturally and linguistically better equipped to do it was not an option for me. On the other hand, I am, so to speak, accustomed to dealing with this kind of handicap, sharing it with all classical philologists (with a hesitant exception of Greek scholars?), who try to understand texts not only written in languages that are not their mother tongues but studying speech and reality from thousands of years ago.

While staggeringly numerous, audiovisual series in English are accessible almost anywhere in the world. They are also the most frequently researched by scholars from all language areas. The worldwide availability of English-language series, as well as the fact that English is easily the most often used second language in the world,[18] ensure their impact on production in other languages, a part of which remains unknown to the global public. Streaming services, such as Netflix,[19] allow access to subtitled (or dubbed) shows from many countries.

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[17] FX Networks' researchers provide statistics on the number of new (scripted) shows in the United States, produced for all platforms (broadcast networks, cable, and streaming) since 2009. Because of Covid-19, the numbers, which until 2019 had been showing a steady upward tendency, went down by 7% in 2020. Still, the 2019 peak was 532 shows compared to 200 in 2010. Streaming remains the main source of growth (Stoll, 2021; Lafayette, 2021).

[18] According to Dylan Lyons (2021): 20% of the global population or 1.35 billion people speak English; 360 million are native speakers; for almost 1 billion people English is their second language. For a 2021 regional breakdown of non-native English speakers, see the *Education First English Proficiency Index* (2021).

[19] There are many more such services (in Europe, e.g., HBO Max, Disney+, and Amazon Prime Video) but Netflix comes to mind first, as it is currently the largest streaming service in the world, available in 190 countries, even though not in China, Crimea, North Korea, Russia, and Syria, states known for their strict control over media. In Russia, the service was suspended on March 6, 2022, in protest against the February 24 Russian invasion of Ukraine (Jason Wise from EarthWeb posted

Still, the offer is, out of necessity, selective. Conference volumes centred on specific themes often disappoint readers who hope and fail to find discussions of series they consider essential. The problem is being gradually alleviated through synergy created in large international research projects combined with a narrowing of focus[20] and by specialized series of publications, each volume tackling a specific area of research.[21]

Greek mythology was an essential source of inspiration for the ancients themselves. The famous Greek playwrights wrote tragedies retelling myths in new versions; the titles of the plays read like a list of mythological heroes. Early Christians added the Old and New Testaments to the legacy of Greek and Roman literature. Antiquity, its literature and fine arts, influenced the elites of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as it was omnipresent in education; Latin was the language of the Church, and it was also a *lingua franca* for diplomats and intellectuals. Greek and Roman mythology as a source of topics and themes was ubiquitous in all arts during the Renaissance. Curiously, despite its admiration for the rule of reason and evidence of the senses, the Enlightenment developed an interest in folk and fairy tales. During the same period, people began to wonder whether the longstanding devotion to the great past was not excessive and did not hinder the development of originality, imagination, and inventiveness. The questioning of the worth and uses of antiquity in modern times, a recurrent theme debated in various ways and for various purposes

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the information in the 2022 installment of his report on Netlix, which has since been replaced by his December 12, 2023, report referring only to 2023 news).

[20] A good example of such an endeavour combining a large research team with a narrowed focus of study is provided in Katarzyna Marciniak's ERC Consolidator Grant, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, which made it possible to create the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* – still a work in progress – offering descriptions and analyses of hundreds of cultural texts inspired by Classical Antiquity including 126 audiovisual productions. Entries for the entire *Survey* were contributed by ca. 350 researchers and cover texts from 45 countries.

[21] Like, e.g., the series of monographs and edited volumes "Screening Antiquity," launched at the same time as the *Our Mythical Childhood* ERC Grant, in 2015, by Edinburgh University Press and edited by Monica Silveira Cyrino and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones. By early 2022, the series numbered ten instalments: Rome, *Season Two*: *Trial and Triumph* edited by Monica Silveira Cyrino, Ben-Hur: *The Original Bluckbuster* by Jon Solomon, *Cowboy Classics: The Roots of the American Western in the Epic Tradition* by Kirsten Day, *STARZ* Spartacus: *Reimagining an Icon on Screen* edited by Antony Augoustakis and Monica Silveira Cyrino, *Designs on the Past: How Hollywood Created the Ancient World* by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Epic Heroes on Screen* edited by Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci, *Ancient Greece on British Television* edited by Fiona Hobden and Amanda Wrigley, *Screening the Golden Ages of the Classical Tradition* edited by Meredith E. Safran, *Screening Divinity* by Lisa Maurice, and *Ancient Epic in Film and Television* by Amanda Potter and Hunter Gardner.

since the late Roman Empire, took in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries the form of the so-called Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns.[22] Under different guises, this debate continues today, with occasional classicist voices taking up the challenge.[23]

One way to bring the research material to a manageable scope is to focus the present inquiry clearly on series inspired by classical mythology, which *ipso facto* discounts shows inspired by ancient history. Yet, completely ignoring the "historical" series would be a mistake for one main reason: in contemporary popular culture, boundaries between mythology and ancient history are blurred, as they were already in antiquity when the Homeric Trojan War was not considered a fictional story. Historical figures, having passed the test of millennia, often acquire a mythical veneer and a quasi-mythological stature (for example, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra VII Philopator), and as such have affinities with both history and mythology. Their image across centuries may fluctuate from hero to villain, and again, to hero; they may even acquire for a while the semblance of an ordinary human being. On the other hand, our knowledge of ancient history and its actors is frequently sketchy. The temptation to embellish the picture using guesswork and imagination appears overwhelming to scriptwriters but may also influence historians. "Historical" films and television series about antiquity rely, out of necessity, on many conjectures and semi-verifiable claims. When figures like the two centurions mentioned by Caesar (*Gall*. 5.44), Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo, who served in an unidentified legion, become characters in popular culture, whether in novels,[24] television series,[25] or games,[26] they are provided with fictional but fully developed personalities and complete biographies. An average viewer perceives today's images of antiquity in either "mythological" or "historical" shows as mirroring the same,

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[22] Among the many publications related to this debate, Gilbert Highet's *The Classical Tradition* ([1949] 1985, 261–288) remains the most illuminating. See also his selected bibliography on the subject, p. 640, as well as the more recent works on the subject by Joseph M. Levine (1991, 1999).

[23] See, e.g., these two examples: Mary Beard's *Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures and Innovations* (2013) and Katarzyna Marciniak's "The Ancient Tradition in the 21st Century" (2013).

[24] The 1987 *Legion* tetralogy of the "Videssos Cycle" by Harry Turtledove; Colleen McCullough's *Caesar: Let The Dice Fly* (1997); Michael Livingston's *The Shards of Heaven* (2015) and *The Gates of Hell* (2016), which features the two centurions as loyal protectors of Cleopatra's children. Simon J.A. Turney's *Marius' Mules II: The Belgae* (2010) features both soldiers as centurions of Legio XIII.

[25] Vorenus and Pullo are among the characters of the 2005–2007 BBC–HBO two-season epic drama *Rome*.

[26] *Total War Rome II* (based on the series *Rome*) and *Expeditions: Rome*, a Danish role-playing game.

remote past, only occasionally distinguishable as different. What contributes further to this confusion is, on the one hand, the occasional presence of authentic historical figures in mythical shows, and on the other, the appearance of fictional (even mythological) characters in historical shows.

Another important distinction between these two types of series stems from differences in their purpose, intent, and function. In a mythological show, the function of entertainment dominates all others. In a historical series, the educational function prevails. Sometimes, a historical show veers towards historical reconstruction and documentary, questioning (or disregarding) the authority of historical sources and textbooks. Such shows may commemorate and highlight historical figures against a more or less fictionalized background of past events. Creative intentions behind a historical series may significantly diverge from those underpinning a mythological series. Their purpose is different, and they may include unresolved biases and deep-rooted cultural, ethnic, and ideological propensities or discontents. Ancient history is about nations as they were 1,500–2,000 years ago, having little in common with their twenty-first-century descendants. Yet, it is often viewed today through a lens coloured by what happened to these nations later and how they now view their past interactions with Greece and Rome. For example, a British show about the Roman conquest of Britain may be critical of the character and behaviour of Roman commanders,[27] a French one may favour Gallic heroes,[28] a German one may exaggerate victories of Germanic tribes,[29] and so on. There is nothing wrong with such approaches and they may lead to successful shows. However, the excessive ideological load often detectable in such productions may appeal to national audiences for whom they were designed but disappoint and frustrate viewers from other regions.

The scope of the present study is further pared down by discounting series which present no hard evidence that their creators were inspired by antiquity but include characters, themes, or structures that could potentially be compared to those from classical mythology and literature. Opening the boundaries of the discipline to encompass the so-called "masked encounters, shadows, and echos"

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[27] See, e.g., the comedy series *Chelmsford 123* (Rory McGrath and Jimmy Mulville, 1988–1990) and the historical fantasy drama *Britannia* (Jez and Tom Butterworth, 2018–2021).

[28] See the animated series *Idéfix et les Irréductibles* (Charles Vaucelle, 2021) and the delayed *Le combat des chefs* (Alain Chabat, 2025).

[29] See, e.g., *Barbaren* (Barbara Eder and Stephen St. Leger, 2020–2022).

of Classical Antiquity has been occasionally proposed and practised.[30] While such an approach relies on more subjective premises, it remains a legitimate and promising position in specific cases; however, adopting it here could significantly blur the scope of the study. The *raison d'être* for this book is an attempt to provide a satisfactory review of the body of twenty-first-century audiovisual series from the point of view of directly evidenced classical inspiration. Such an assessment has not been produced yet and until it is, venturing into the vast expanse of conjectures, potential parallels, and alleged similarities appears premature and ought to be attempted only as studies of individual cases.

The classical education of elites ensured that antiquity and its heritage have remained relevant for centuries. The command of the two "dead" languages, especially Greek, gradually shrank and became a rarity but did not disappear; in contrast with the past generations of students bitterly complaining about the required effort and conditioned to detest their Latin masters, those who study Latin and Greek today do it predominantly because they want to and grumble about it much less. The study of Classics survived to the twenty-first century as an energetic and vibrant field, and unquestionably remains "a work in progress" according to Mary Beard (2013), an assessment much more helpful and meaningful than the quarter-of-a-century-old slogan, often repeated out of context, *Le latin est mort et bien mort* (Wacquet, 1998, 322).

The term *mythological inspiration* refers to a show's connections to classical mythology, its Greek and Latin literary sources, the languages of these sources, and visual and material culture. These connections may reach to antiquity itself or to later stages and layers of reception that have accumulated throughout history. The rather imprecise and vague term "inspiration," or "inspired," will gain more clarity if we add a list of possible instances (already played with and

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[30] See the collection edited by Ricardo Apostol and Anastasia Bakogianni (2018), who use these labels and have even called their book *Locating Classical Receptions on Screen: Masks, Shadows, Echos*. See also Martin M. Winkler's book (2017) or Jennifer Ann Rea's chapter (2022, 66–81), in which she discusses the *Aeneid* and the apocalyptic science-fiction movie *Snowpiercer* (2013) by Bong Joon-ho, treating them as companion texts, even though the identified Virgilian echos do not appear intentional. Another example is *The Wire* (2002–2008), HBO's outstanding drama chronicling the vagaries of crime, law enforcement, politics, education, and media in Baltimore as the show follows a team of cops and the criminals they are after. Its creator, David Simon, publicly discussed the similarity of forces shaping the drug trade to the Olympic gods; he also said that the main concept behind the show – the inevitability of fate – is borrowed from the great Greek tragic playwrights. See Love, 2010, 487–507, where Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is identified as the main potential philosophical inspiration for Simon, who was never as explicit in his interviews.

variously identified by theorists of classical reception; Hardwick, 2003, 5–11)[31] supported by examples.

1. The most obvious example of a mythologically inspired series is a straight-forward adaptation[32] or demonstrated adherence to one or more ancient texts, for instance, the 2018 BBC One and Netflix co-production, *Troy: Fall of a City*,[33] created by David Farr.
2. A retelling of myths with a change of focus (or point of view), like the 2003 miniseries *Helen of Troy* directed by John Kent Harrison.
3. An original retelling or re-imagining of myths based on a blend of ancient sources and the creator's vision, such as the 2013–2015 BBC *Atlantis* or Nick Willing's 2015 *Olympus*.
4. A modern paraphrase of an ancient source, such as the 2005 Dutch *Medea* directed by Theo van Gogh.[34]
5. Creation of original mythological plots within the universe of Greek myths, for instance, the ongoing 2020 series *Blood of Zeus* produced by Netflix.
6. Themes borrowed from classical mythology, used in single episodes or arcs in a series dealing with matters basically unrelated to antiquity, like the 2007 *Sarah Jane Adventures* (S01E03–04): "The Eye of the Gorgon."
7. Mythological objects or creatures and their powers are featured in an other-wise non-mythological environment, for example, the 2009–2014 *Warehouse 13* created by Jane Espenson and D. Brent Mote, or the 2014–2018 *Librarians*, developed by John Rogers.
8. Use of Latin and/or Greek expressions with various degrees of linguistic correctness in the many variations of witch/supernatural shows, such as Joss Whedon's 1997–2003 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Constance M. Burge's 1998–2006 *Charmed*, Maggie Friedman's 2013–2014 *Witches of East End*, Sera Gamble and John McNamara's 2015–2020 *Magicians*, 2016–2019

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[31] For a review of various theoretical debates on classical reception, see Hardwick and Stray, (2008) 2011b, 2–5.

[32] Adaptations are of course rarely, if ever, simple. My favourite adaptation scholar, Linda Hutcheon, says in her 2006 book, *A Theory of Adaptation* (8–9): "as *a process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation; […] adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing."

[33] Full bibliographical data on all the titles quoted here are provided in Chapter 2, "Chronological Survey of Twenty-First-Century Audiovisual Series and Films Inspired by Classical Antiquity," under the date of release.

[34] Joel and Ethan Coen's 2000 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is another good example of a modern paraphrase, in this case in film.

Shadowhunters: The Mortal Instruments developed by Ed Dexter, 2018–2022 remake of *Charmed*, Juan Carlos Medina, Alice Troughton, and Sarah Walker's 2018–2022 *A Discovery of Witches*, or Dennis Heaton's 2019–2020 *The Order*.

9. Use of a concept, a quote from an ancient author, an image, name, or title borrowed from antiquity, as in Bryan Fuller and Alex Kurtzman's 2017–2024 *Star Trek: Discovery*, as well as naming starships and titling episodes in the *Star Trek* universe and in the 1997–2007 *Stargate SG-1*.

10. Documentary or docudramatic attempts at explaining the origins of myths and rationalizing their message, for instance, Tom Pollocks's 2003 *The Real Jason and the Argonauts*, Natalie Maynes and Bettany Hughes's 2010 "Atlantis: The Evidence", or Nina Mavis Brunner's 2015 *Aus den Spuren von Odysseus*.

These criteria for the identification and gathering of mythologically inspired twenty-first-century audiovisual series included in the present inquiry were used to produce the second, fundamental chapter of the book – **"Chronological Survey of Twenty-First-Century Audiovisual Series and Films Inspired by Classical Antiquity"** – which lists in a strictly chronological sequence well over 400 titles of series, miniseries, feature films, television films, documentaries, and shorts. Even though the emphasis is on mythological inspirations, productions inspired by ancient history are included in the Survey to provide a more complete synoptic picture of the interest enjoyed by Classical Antiquity among film and television makers during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In spite of the efforts that went into the compilation of the Survey, it would be preposterous (and naive) to claim that all such productions, even only in English or available with English dubbing or subtitles, are included there.

Why did I embark on such a time-consuming and labour-intensive task? Certainly not from latent masochistic tendencies but rather from insecurity and the related need for verification. Here, a confession related to methodology is in order. Since the early days of my philological adventure, half a century ago, when I began working as a textual critic and text editor, I was obsessed with collecting all extant manuscripts and all incunabula of the text I wanted to publish, examining their common and diverging traits, and trying to see if and how they were connected, and only then establishing the text according to the gathered evidence. It was the principle of textual criticism taught by my MA and PhD advisor, Warsaw University Ciceronian scholar Kazimierz

F. Kumaniecki (1905–1977).[35] A new study of the manuscript tradition was a must. I completed it for my 1978 edition of Claudian's *De bello Gildonico* and, again, for my 1981–1984 editions of three of Cicero's speeches from 54 BCE.[36] In the same spirit, I approached my much more recent (2015–2019) work on the reception of ancient theatre in communist Poland, compiling first all performances of ancient plays at national and regional theatres from 1945 to 1989. I was able to handle the resulting pool of statistical data with relative ease, having completed several courses in statistics a decade earlier, which were part of my MBA degree at Concordia University in Montreal. When classical reception in adolescent and young adult culture became my focus, I began by tackling specific cases – J.K. Rowling, Joann Sfar and Christophe Blain, *Once Upon a Time* S05E12–22, *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* S03E01, 03, 18, Philip Pullman – simultaneously writing and reviewing entries for the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*. Faced with a mind-boggling volume and diversity of available productions, I realized that it would be impossible to paint a convincing general picture of the twenty-first-century audiovisual series inspired by classical mythology and to generate a valid assessment without reliable data on all (or almost all)[37] such productions.

To my knowledge, there is only one collection of reasonably complete data on audiovisual productions inspired by antiquity somewhat comparable to my Chronological Survey. However, it is different in design, scope, and intended goals. Hervé Dumont, film historian and director of the Cinémathèque suisse in Lausanne from 1996 to 2008, published it in book form, entitled *L'Antiquité au cinema*, in 2009, and in 2013 posted it online, updating it with content either missed or produced between 2008 and 2013. The title is a bit of a misnomer, as the approximately 2,200 entries listed in the book include not only theatrical films but also television movies, television series, and videos, beginning in the age of silent cinema. Dumont's *Antiquité* is monumental (over 700 pages) and covers pre-history, the Old Testament times, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor, followed by Pharaonic Egypt, Greek mythology and Greek history, legendary

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[35] On Kumaniecki's school of textual criticism, see Jerzy Axer's illuminating essay "Between Science, Art, and Forgery: Latin Textual Criticism as a Case Example" (2020, 21–29).

[36] The first two speeches, *De Cn. Plancio* and *De Rabirio Postumo*, share the same manuscript tradition. The third, *Pro M. Scauro*, is preserved in only one palimpsest. My efforts went into carefully studying its high-tech facsimile and investigating the original during my stay at the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana in 1982. Angelo Paredi, who managed this unique institution for seventeen years, from 1967 to 1984, kindly let me study the library's treasure for as long as I needed.

[37] Potential omissions, while unavoidable, should be insignificant enough not to bring into question the main conclusions reached as a result of translating the Survey into the language of numbers.

Rome, Roman republican and imperial history, the New Testament and early Christianity, and finally, the Byzantine Empire, creating, according to Jean Tou-lard's preface, "un panorama de l'histoire de l'humanité vu par le cinema" (Tulard, 2013, vii). Dumont's main preoccupation as a historian is to study how film interprets history; the template he uses follows single events and historical figures. While his general structure is chronological and the overall sequence of historical ages has not been tampered with, each period is divided into chapters devoted to specific themes or heroes; in each chapter, individual productions are presented in a separate chronological order, starting from the earliest silent movies and continuing until 2013. Such a design greatly complicates the logistics required for assessing topics in conjunction with others created at the same, or at a different time. It provides otherwise valuable pictures of single themes but, contrary to a chronological survey, does not offer an easily achieved *vue d'ensemble*, or even a possibility of easily constructing one. Another significant shortcoming from the point of view of my purpose is the scope of Dumont's book. As it was published in 2013, it does not include productions from almost an entire decade or half of the studied period. The Chronological Survey presented in Chapter 2 tentatively also lists some films and series scheduled for 2023, 2024 and even 2025/2026 releases. Each entry, in addition to the data about the discussed production, is provided with a list of related studies.

Chapter 3, **"Handling the Data,"** discusses the status of classical reception scholarship to identify approaches and research practices from the beginning of the study of classical inspirations in film and television and to assess their usefulness in dealing with the data accumulated in the Chronological Survey of Chapter 2. The review of the scholarship shows the scope of the gap in existing research that the present study is attempting to fill. It suggests whether and how a reasonably comprehensive image of television series as the dominant genre of audiovisual classical reception can be produced.

Chapter 4, entitled **"Classical Antiquity in the Twenty-First-Century Audiovisual Series: An Overview in Numbers (and Words),"** is the next stage of the present study. The chapter intends to interpret the picture resulting from the significant amount of data on antiquity reflected in audiovisual productions, highlighting the favourite mythological themes and characters treated in these productions, their whys and hows, and the format and content categories most likely to refer to mythological themes. The outcome may encourage further reflection on the contributions of Graeco-Roman mythology to how

television series,[38] during the first decades of the twenty-first century, coloured the lens through which popular culture views the image of the world, life, interests, and imagination of its inhabitants. As far as I know, such a statistical picture combined with an interpretation of themes and main concepts was never attempted, possibly because Dumont's impressive work was not designed for digital manipulation and covers titles up to 2013, and also because nobody has yet come up with the idea of creating a thesaurus and concordance of audiovisual series inspired by antiquity, based on the template of, for example, the admirable French *Thesaurus Exemplorum Medii Aevi* (*ThEMA*), a resource open to the general public and currently housing over 13,000 entries.[39]

There are many publications about the influence of antiquity on literature in practically all European languages.[40] There is also a considerable number of studies on audiovisual productions. However, most of them focus on film,[41] with classical reception in television added as an afterthought in a less favoured second part, or the studies combine both media under the inclusive banner of the *screen*,[42] with television treated selectively. Interesting chapters on selected aspects of classical inspiration published in collective volumes[43] often provide valuable insights, as do monographs featuring individual television series.[44] Studies centred on the reception of particular myths or mythological figures have produced reviews and analyses of specific strands of classical legacy across the ages.[45] The *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* (2023), still a work in progress

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[38] The "television" part of the term, while still in active usage, is becoming something of a misnomer in today's reality of widespread on-demand viewing via computer, DVD, streaming services, and the ubiquitous smartphone. Hence my preference for the more inclusive label – "audiovisual."

[39] See *ThEMA: Thesaurus Exemplorum Medii Aevi* (n.d.) as well as the section on the medieval *exempla* in Chapter 1 of this book.

[40] See, e.g., Curtius, (1949) 2013; Highet, (1949) 1985; Grafton, Most, and Settis, 2010; Silk, Gildenhard, and Barrow, 2014, as well as various edited volumes and companions, such as Hardwick and Stray, (2008) 2011a.

[41] See, e.g., Solomon, (1978) 2001a; Winkler, 2001; Nisbet, (2006) 2008; J. Richards, 2008; Michelakis and Wyke, 2013; Dumont, 2013.

[42] See Blanshard and Shahabudin, (2011) 2013 (who use the word "screen" but focus on film only); Cyrino and Safran, 2015; Pomeroy, 2017; Winkler, 2017; Apostol and Bakogianni, 2018.

[43] See, e.g., Bost-Fiévet and Provini, 2014; Rogers and Stevens, 2015 (in science fiction), 2017 (in modern fantasy); 2019 (in science fiction and fantasy).

[44] See, e.g., Cyrino, 2008c (*Rome*, season 1); Cyrino, 2015b (*Rome*, season 2); Augoustakis and Cyrino, 2017 (Starz *Spartacus*), 2022 (*Troy: Fall of a City*).

[45] See, e.g., Hall, (2008) 2012 (Ulysses); Augoustakis and Raucci, 2018 (epic heroes); Blanshard and Stafford, 2020 (Hercules); Lovatt, 2021 (the Argonauts).

although well advanced in the category of "Literature,"[46] offers (as of January 11, 2023) 126 entries on classically inspired films and television series produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The number of audiovisual texts created in the twenty-first century presented in the *OMC Survey* has barely reached 40 entries, which is significantly less than the well over 400 titles listed in the Chronological Survey compiled to provide material for the present inquiry.

The final chapter, **"In the Guise of a Conclusion,"** will rely on a scrupulous checking and re-checking of the available data in all logical configurations imaginable. The goal of the chapter is to pull together into a coherent image the main themes from Classical Antiquity recorded in the Chronological Survey and highlighted in Chapters 3 and 4, as well as to formulate the trends in classical reception active in the audiovisual serial narratives against the background of what reception scholars have suggested until now.

With that purpose in mind – which applies to the book as a whole – let us proceed with the introductory review of what happened up to the point when the genre studied here was born in the mid-twentieth century. This prequel to the audiovisual series begins, unsurprisingly, *ab ovo*, in "times immemorial," when storytelling was the only source of knowledge about the world and storytellers were held (presumably) in high regard. It delves deep into the history of episodic narrative. It covers the still accessible recorded legacy of human imagination in as much detail as can be squeezed into one book and by the efforts of one scholar. I offer no apologies to those interested in audiovisual series who may view my approach as leading well beyond their need to know because looking at the similarity of stories that have shared the power to delight, produced in each consecutive century and for many centuries, testifies if not to the existence of a vague common genealogical tree, certainly to a fascinating evolution of the creative drive to capture an audience who dreams of being captured.

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[46] See the opening screen of the database, where totals for each category of entries are listed (as of January 11, 2023, it shows 1,072 literary entries).