

RECEPTION OF MESOPOTAMIA ON FILM



MARIA DE FÁTIMA ROSA

WILEY Blackwell

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*For my brother Emanuel,
In memory of the movies of our childhood and the yearnings of our adult lives.
Until our reunion.*

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List of Abbreviations

<i>ABull</i>	<i>The Art Bulletin</i>
<i>AJA</i>	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
<i>BCSMS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies</i>
<i>BICS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies</i>
<i>CDLI</i>	<i>Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative</i>
<i>ePSD</i>	<i>electronic Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary Project</i>
<i>ETCSL</i>	<i>Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature</i>
<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Iraq (British School of Archaeology in Iraq)</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JICMS</i>	<i>The Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>ORACC</i>	<i>Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus</i>
<i>QRFV</i>	<i>Quarterly Review of Film and Video</i>
<i>RAI</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale</i>

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Introduction: Reception of Mesopotamia and the Cinema Lens

0.1 Reception Studies and Cinema

Studies on Reception of antiquity are relatively recent. Charles Martindale first included Reception Theory in the field of Classical Studies in 1993 with *Redeeming the Text: Latin poetry and the hermeneutics of reception*. The Professor of Latin from the University of Bristol was inspired by the research line inaugurated by the Constance School, with scholars such as Wolfgang Iser and especially Hans Robert Jauss, who, in the 1960s, boosted the field named Aesthetic of Reception. Jauss postulated that the observer of a work of art should be given an active role. In broad terms, he considered that the work of art was not a static or timeless phenomenon.¹ In his own words, “A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence.”² Martindale thus resorted to this seminal work to introduce new conceptions in the study of the Classics, claiming, like Jauss before him, that an author has no control over his work since it does not have an immutable meaning, always depending on the interpretations made about it and hence subjected to the cognitive role of the observer/reader, the “active principle.”³

To Martindale, the fact that reception presupposes the active participation of the reader, being himself an essential part in the relationship between present and the past and its prolific dialogue,⁴ differentiates it from other sorts of analyses. Indeed, reception contrasts with other concepts that can also be applied to the study of the past, although with different meanings and uses, that is: “tradition” and “appropriation.” If, in the first case, we speak of an almost passive acceptance of a legacy from the past, in the second we are perhaps faced with a rupture of dialogue, an apprehension that makes it almost impossible to shape and modify the reader’s sensitivity. Considering the involvement of the reader, reception therefore presents itself as a basis for the

1 Vargas 2020, p. 94.

2 Jauss 1982, p. 21.

3 Martindale 2013, p. 174.

4 Martindale 2007, p. 298.

study and interpretation of the reason to why there is not a single reading for history.⁵ In fact, we must remind ourselves that neither the culture produced by past civilizations is dead nor its influence on the present is linear.⁶ One should not, therefore, succumb to the illusion of considering antiquity as stationary, since as an object of analysis it changes throughout time, from one generation to the other, and from researcher to researcher.⁷ In other words, Martindale assumes that the same historical vehicle, the same *text*,⁸ can be interpreted in different ways depending on the agent and on the time of that interpretation. Naturally, history, as much as it wants to find unique and stagnant readings, depends, in large part, on its observer, on its reader, and on the way his *present* contemplates that *past*. Jauss inclusively reminded us in his *opus* of the words of R.G. Collingwood, who “postulate, posed in his critique of the prevailing ideology of objectivity in history – History is nothing but the reenactment of past thought in the historian’s mind.”⁹

Plus, the text of the past can be perceived by the reader of the present in a way that its author did not foresee or conceive it. The reader is an active part in the process of transfer of knowledge, of formulating interpretations, and of extracting his own sensitivity from the *text*. Hence, the passage of the *text* from the author to the reader happens, as we started by saying, through a process of conversation and interconnection. Through the *text*, the *self* of *now* dialogues with the *self* of *before*.

The same can be said about a cinematographic *text*. Once created, the work passes from its creator to those who receive and enjoy it, being subjected to their emotions. The film is as much or more of the viewer than of its director and screenwriter. As Burnette-Bletsch remembers “both filmmakers and film-viewers should be recognized as active participants in the interpretive process. In other words, establishing the meaning(s) of a film is not the sole domain of the filmmaker (...) Like the readers of a text, film-viewers are not passive recipients of meanings encoded in a filmic ‘text’ but actively participate in the construction of a film’s meaning.”¹⁰

When it comes to the film on antiquity, reception is everything. James Porter even acknowledges that we take a serious risk in avoiding the importance of reception. After all, “To oppose the obvious fact that the classical past (so called) simply cannot exist without its being received is to live in the protective vacuum of an illusion – the illusion that classical studies and their objects are timeless and eternal, invulnerable to the impingements of history and to contingency.”¹¹ One could also extend this concern to films set in the pre-classical age. In reality, if we consider that Martindale’s Reception Aesthetic was first applied to Classical Studies, and primarily to Linguistics, and that it was followed by other seminal works, such as Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray’s *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (2008),¹² also regarding the Greek and

5 Idem, p. 301.

6 Hardwick 2003, p. 2.

7 Porter 2008, pp. 471–472.

8 By *text* we should understand any vehicle passible of conveying meaning, be it a book, a sculpture, or a musical piece. In the specific case of our book, the texts under analysis will be the films.

9 *Apud*, Jauss 1982, p. 21.

10 Burnett-Betsch 2016, p. 3.

11 Porter 2008, p. 469.

12 This book was preceded by Lorna Hardwick’s *Reception Studies*, published for the first time in 2003.

Roman worlds, we may say that in its origin it only contemplated a partial fraction of the past. If it is true that the authors of the latter contemplate *receptions* beyond this universe, highlighting the importance of “interactions with a succession of contexts, both classically and non-classically orientated,”¹³ it is also a fact that they acknowledge that “Additional volumes would be needed to do justice (...) to the cultures of the ancient near east and their receptions.”¹⁴ Thus, it would be fair to state that with regard to a civilization such as Mesopotamia, reception is still taking its first steps. Recently, Garcia-Ventura and Verderame, proposing to contribute to the thickening of Reception Studies on the ancient Near East¹⁵ underlined the way in which this cultural quadrant has always been relegated to the background, often considered “a necessary but undeveloped forerunner of Greek culture.”¹⁶ As they acknowledge, the ancient Near East has been almost completely ignored by Reception Studies, and only in recent years have scholars such as Bohrer,¹⁷ Brusius,¹⁸ or Malley¹⁹ presented studies on Reception, although starting mainly from an art historical or archaeological perspective.²⁰

Frederick Nathaniel Bohrer was probably the first to apply the idea that the meaning of the text is not only passively received but actively produced to the study of Mesopotamia’s perceptions (during the nineteenth century). We must therefore ask what exactly is the text, especially concerning a civilization such as Mesopotamia, so harassed by the past, so intriguing and intoxicating that despite its oblivion of centuries has managed to remain in the imagination of the succeeding civilizations and has reached the present day? As Porter admitted, “One of the greatest ironies of classical studies is that they are *themselves* a form of reception studies.”²¹ The same might be said regarding Mesopotamian studies. Indeed, when we speak about reception, we need to be aware of the current of different layers of conceptions and receptions that the original historical phenomenon has been subjected to throughout the ages. In this sense, the first part of this book, called “The pre-cinematographic image,” aims to provide a comprehensive guide to the reader, starting in the first interpretations and receptions of Mesopotamian history until the eve of the twentieth century.

In Mesopotamian studies, when one comes in contact with the text, it is already impossible to break the sequence of perceptions and meanings, what Hans Georg Gadamer would call “a continuing chain,”²² that have contributed to its *cumulative production process* over the centuries. For instance, Luigi Maggi’s *La regina di Ninive* (1911) is a short film based on Voltaire’s tragedy *Sémiramis* (1748), which is in turn a creation based on a story presented by the Greek historian and writer Diodorus Siculus, grounded on perceptions of ancient Mesopotamia. Maggi’s text is itself a collection of

13 Hardwick and Stray 2008, p. 1.

14 Idem, Ibidem.

15 With the volume *Receptions of the Ancient Near East in Popular Culture and Beyond* (Garcia-Ventura and Verderame 2020).

16 Garcia-Ventura and Verderame 2020, p. 2.

17 Bohrer 2003.

18 Brusius 2012.

19 Malley 2012.

20 Regarding Reception on Mesopotamia, vide Garcia-Ventura, Verderame 2020, p. 2.

21 Porter 2008, p. 469.

22 Gadamer 2004, p. 197. About the idea of “chain of receptions,” vide Vargas 2020, pp. 94 and 96.

other texts. The dialogue between writer and reader is thus designed in the stratigraphy of interpretations and interconnections between the sensibilities of the various agents of reception in the *longue durée*. Reception Theory as a methodology thus allows us to trace the results of these conversations between the *text(s)* and its reader(s). This aspect is particularly interesting with regard to Mesopotamia because until 1842 there were either no textual evidences or monuments that could speak about the phenomena of the past, there was no material culture to attest to its importance and history, besides a *reading*, which was a dubious one, based on the ideas of third parties and never on the *self* (Mesopotamia had no voice). After the takeover of Babylon by the Persians in 539 BC, the destruction of some sectors of the city by Xerxes I, and the successive abandonment of the *urbe* with the foundation of a new city that would come to steal its protagonism – Seleucia – Mesopotamia sank. These events subjected the ancient land between the rivers to a sepulchral silence until its rediscovery by archaeology in 1842. If it were not for the Greeks and the Old Testament, we would not even have known about it. Thus, as Hardwick said “Reception within antiquity is as important mediating factor”²³ between ancient near eastern and modern cultures.

Mesopotamia has since then been received over the years, “transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented.”²⁴ Although Martindale originally acknowledges that this broad process of reception could encompass, in his words “writing about *Paradise Lost*, or the mythological *poesie* of Titian, or the film *Gladiator*, or the iconography of fascism,”²⁵ he also attributed different values to these different texts, distinguishing the “material of high quality” from the “banal or the quotidian.”²⁶ He feared that “we may end by trivializing reception within the discipline; already a classics student is far more likely to spend time analysing *Gladiator* than the *Commedia* of Dante.”²⁷ For his position he was criticized by other reception theorists such as Tim Rood, who, on the contrary, claims that “A film that one might regard as in some ways ‘bad’ can still help one engage with antiquity: thus *Gladiator*, like *Spartacus* before it, is part of a story about the reception both of gladiatorial combat and of ancient representation of violence,” the film and its contemporary reception matter.²⁸

After all, as Staiger claimed “The job of a reception historian is to account for events of interpretation and affective experience,” and the film fits well within this logic.²⁹ Reception through a medium like cinema should consider the results from both psychological and sociological factors that cannot be isolated.³⁰ On the other hand, what matters is not only the immediate relationship of the viewer with the film projected on the screen, but also, and above all, the relationship that lasts after the first has left the cinema room (a relationship that could be extended not only through cognitive memory but also through different vehicles that adorned the film, the stories and its stars,

23 Hardwick 2003, p. 4.

24 Hardwick and Stray 2008, p. 1.

25 Martindale 2006, p. 2.

26 Idem, p. 11.

27 Idem, *ibidem*.

28 Rood 2013, p. 200.

29 Staiger 2000, p. 1.

30 Idem, p. 3.

such as magazines and cinema literature).³¹ For Pierre Sorlin, the analysis of an historical film would have two possible paths for a historian: first, to understand how the contemporary audience saw itself through the representation of the past; and second, to study the way history and its conscience were transmitted and perceived in the modern world.³² After all, “all films move forward to the present and ‘back to the future’ when they re-present the past.”³³ The way the *past* is felt in the *present*, as well as the way the present *sees* the past, thus become two insurmountable topics of exceptional importance for the study that we present here. In sum, we cannot understand the past narrated in an historical film without understanding the sensibilities inherent to the society that produced it. Film mutates into much more than a piece of art or even an ideological tool; it transforms itself into a product of social and cultural meaning “triggering audience’s imagination.”³⁴

There are, therefore, several aspects to consider when analyzing the reception of the ancient Near East through a vehicle such as film. Aziza listed some characteristics to be taken in consideration: 1) the period that is narrated; 2) the date of the film’s production and the country producing it; and 3) the moment when the film is viewed.³⁵ This last point interests us mainly with regard to the film’s visualization at the time of its premiere, in the year when it was first released. Since that point onwards it may obviously be the target of a multiplicity of interpretations. Thus, the viewer of today will not react in the same way when watching *Intolerance* (1916) as would the viewer of the 1910s. Bearing this in mind, our analysis proposes to contemplate mainly the film as a product of its own time and heir to the psychological and sociological conditions of its first direct readers/viewers.

0.2 Why Cinema? What Cinema?

Cinema should be seen as a universal language capable of annulling the differences and obstacles inherent to socio-cultural disparities. According to John Philip Hewak, “the cinema was conceptualized as an ensemble of codes, some specific to the cinema, others belonging to the culture at large, each comprised of minimal units not necessarily discrete or arbitrary, and not necessarily identifiable. These are the signs of the cinema.”³⁶ In fact, it was widely discussed whether semiology could be applied to cinema, as it is to linguistics, and whether or not cinema contains a sign. Although we do not intend to linger on this issue, we should mention that Umberto Eco claimed that any message has an implicit code and, therefore, the message of cinema could be understood as a sign or as a set of signs.³⁷ Since semiotics is the study *par excellence* of the signal, it is applicable to cinema. The spectator, upon entering the cinema room, while watching the film, would receive this set of messages, this panoply of signs,

31 Mayne 1993, p. 3.

32 Apud, Wyke 1997, p. 37.

33 Barta 1998, p. 13. About this question, vide also De España 2013, p. 45.

34 Biltreyst and Meers 2018, p. 22.

35 Aziza 2009, p. 81.

36 Hewak 1991, p. 122.

37 About Humberto Eco’s thoughts on the visual sign, vide idem, p. 79 and ff.

which he perceived, interpreted, appropriated, and reflected upon, and which revealed his sensibilities. By collecting these signals and interpreting them, the cinema viewer became a participant in a comprehensive and collective process of deciphering,³⁸ thus actively contributing to the cinema's codes reception.

In this perspective, cinema does not differ from other arts and languages that preceded it before it became dominant as a form of public art during the twentieth century. Martin Winkler recalls the words of J.B. Hainsworth when he stated that "at the beginning of literature, when heroic poetry reached society as a whole ... society *listened*; in the twentieth century society *views*."³⁹ The author recalls the importance of cinema as a new medium and criticizes, in the likelihood of Rood after him, the view spread by Charles Martindale that reception and Reception Studies could not be trivialized by choosing vehicles for their analysis considered to be less intellectual, such as films. Naturally, the semiotic analysis of a cinematographic creation anchored in antiquity can bring to light aspects related to the influence of that same antiquity and its products in contemporary societies. For Winkler, a film should indeed, as discussed previously, be considered as a *visual text*, "capable of the close analysis that classical philologists are trained to carry out. I call this *classical film philology*."⁴⁰ The same can be said, naturally, in relation to a *Near Eastern film philology*, which intends, as Winkler claims, to establish a correlation between texts and images, in which the readers "view the ancients as important and even fundamental contributors to an ever-evolving and never-ending cultural continuity."⁴¹ After all, cinema is the main heir to the textual narrative.⁴² And in addition to inheriting a literary tradition, cinema is also, as we shall see, the successor to a series of technologies, conventions, and artistic practices, which it received, retransmitted, and innovated.

We live in a world in which we are constantly overloaded with images, in which more and more people receive information, and especially information about the past and antiquity, through cinema and television, through films (of all sorts, comedy, epic, romance), television series or documentaries. Therefore, the greatest source of historical knowledge for most of the population is undoubtedly the visual media.⁴³ To prove this fact, it would be enough to do a search on Netflix's search engine by the word "antiquity." The media services provider Netflix has become the largest entertainment/media company, with 182.8 million subscribers worldwide.⁴⁴ Thus, the results are quite expressive and revealing: between series and films, we find recent titles like *Roman Empire* (2016), *Noah* (2014), *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018), *Spartacus* (2010), *Rise of an Empire* (2014), or older ones such as *Gladiator* (2000) or *300* (2007). Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) inclusively ushered in a new era in cinema on antiquity that seems to

38 Hansen 1991, p. 17.

39 Winkler 2009, p. 11.

40 Idem, p. 13.

41 Idem, p. 14.

42 Idem, p. 20.

43 Rosenstone 1988, p. 31.

44 Subscriptions increased during the first months of 2020 due to the pandemic outbreak and the confinement of many households. This aspect proves the importance of films and television series as the main means of entertainment and historical dissemination. *The New York Times*, "Everyone You Know Just Signed Up for Netflix:" <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/business/media/netflix-q1-2020-earnings-nflx.html> (accessed on 10 November 2020).

have come to stay, at least judging by the recent remake of *Ben-Hur* (2016) by Timur Bekmambetov or the new reconstitution of the duel between Moses and Ramses II portrayed in the film by Ridley Scott, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014). Although Mesopotamia seems to have been long forgotten by the cinema (the last film that makes a reconstitution of the ancient land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates is the Italian *Ercole contro i tiranni di Babilonia* (1964); this if we exclude *Alexander* (2004) which portrays Babylon but during the Persian era), the truth is that antiquity has become once again a topic appreciated by filmmakers as it had been in the early days of cinema and in the post-Second World War era.

Taking this into account it is possible to reiterate that cinema, as a universal language, became, during the twentieth century, the biggest stage to transmit ancient history and one really appreciated by society. Its importance is also proved by the fact that in the beginning of this century and up to the 1970s, cinema was the most important spectacle activity; television subsequently dethroned films and the cinematographic experience in large theaters. And so, the question arises: is it possible to put history on film without losing its more *professional* nature?⁴⁵ In fact, to answer this question we must understand what history actually is and if it is possible to transform written discourse (in other words, the written narratives – with beginning, middle, and end – that historians produce based on their analysis) into visual discourse? This is considering that, in reality, when we speak of narratives written by historians, given their linguistic and genre constraints, we are considering mere *verbal fictions* – a simple reconstruction of the past and never the past itself. Thus, what really needs to be highlighted is the possibility of transforming *verbal fictions* into *visual fictions*, the possibility of transforming a written *truth* into a visual *truth*, which does not necessarily have to be the same or in conflict with the first.⁴⁶ History, although based on techniques and methodologies that use facts and documents, is never but interpretation, is never but reconstruction. So, going back to the starting question: is it possible to transform *written speech* into *visual speech*? If we consider that each vehicle contains its own mechanisms, its own tools, its own semiotic codes, its forms of representation, its unique added value – Yes. After all, cinema is the triumph of realism.⁴⁷

What cinema will we then be analyzing in this volume? Our analysis will focus on films that intend to reconstruct Mesopotamia,⁴⁸ its culture or its history, whether based on archaeological and historical sources or grounded on legends and conceptions that were forged around it (such as Greek myths and the account of the Old Testament). Thus, with few exceptions that are justified, this study excludes films whose plot takes place after the fall of this civilization,⁴⁹ which is commonly considered to coincide with the conquest of Babylon by the Achaemenid emperor Cyrus the Great, in c. 539 BC. In parallel, and although not exhaustively, we will analyze films

45 Rosenstone 1988, p. 32.

46 Idem, pp. 37 and 40.

47 Michelakis and Wyke 2013a, p. 12.

48 We will analyze the films considered most important for the themes in question. Thus, the priority is not to present a detailed list of movies on Mesopotamia, but to mention and study those that may be more symptomatic of the idea contemporaneity had of the land between the rivers.

49 As, for instance, *Hatifa – Abenteuer einer sklavin* (1960), produced in the German Democratic Republic.

that evoke Mesopotamia (culturally,⁵⁰ artistically,⁵¹ historically⁵² or metaphorically,⁵³ positively or negatively,⁵⁴ retrospectively or prospectively⁵⁵), although they might not be set on it. On the other hand, and also with few exceptions, this study does not include films that were released directly for video or television (such as musicals inspired by famous operas) or non-European or American films.⁵⁶

With regards to the production centers of the movies portraying antiquity and especially the ancient Near East, there are three major countries to highlight: France, Italy, and the United States of America – the ones which held the leadership of cinematic production during the earlier years, and which we will analyze in detail in Chapter 4.⁵⁷ Concerning Mesopotamia in particular, it is possible to divide the cinematic productions in three large groups:

- 1) – The short movies produced from 1905 up until the middle of the 1910s, which consisted of silent films that had an estimated time of 6 to 15 minutes (predominantly Italian and French productions);
- 2) – The silent movies produced in the second half of the 1910s and during the 1920s, which were the first feature films ever produced on Mesopotamia and had a variable time duration (predominantly American productions);⁵⁸
- 3) – The movies produced from the 1950s until the present time, consisting of sound feature films. Within this category there is a higher prevalence of productions made during the 1950s and 1960s (predominantly Italian and American productions). Also, after the 1960s, the majority of the movies do not constitute recreations of Mesopotamia or of its legends, but are instead pictures that refer to an aspect of it and that might be set in a whole different time (normally contemporaneity). Thus, it would be possible to subdivide this third group into two categories: Mesopotamia on film and Mesopotamia in film.⁵⁹

If we examine in detail these three groups, there seems to be a hiatus from the mid-1920s until the 1950s. One of the reasons that may explain the disappearance of films about the ancient Near East, and in particular about Mesopotamia after the 1920s, is the rapid decline of the filmic genre that consisted of historical adaptations and

50 For instance, *The Mole People* (1956), which explores Sumerian culture.

51 An example is the Italian film *I sopravvissuti della città morta* (1984), which presents the temple of the god Gilgamesh, and the sarcophagus in which he would have been buried.

52 For instance, *Alexander* (2004) or *The Egyptian* (1954).

53 *Babel* (2004) and *The Exorcist* (1973) are two examples. They constitute two distinct references: the first one collects for its title an image of confusion and dispersion transversal to Judeo-Christian thought, although the film has nothing to do with ancient Babel/Babylon; the other uses Mesopotamian antiquity, more specifically its daemon Pazuzu, to explore the devil that takes possession of the child on which the film focuses, although it does not center on this civilization.

54 *Evil Dead's* (1981) chaos is caused by the recitation of ancient Sumerian enchantments.

55 Such as *Metropolis* (1927) that takes place in a future time, in the year 2026.

56 As is the case with the Iraqi film *Nabokodnassar* (1962) or the Turkish *Nemrud* (1979).

57 Although other countries have produced films regarding Mesopotamia, such as England, Germany, or Austria, their productions were not so many and their importance in the early days of cinema is not comparable to that of the other industries. As so, we choose to focus on these three.

58 Although *Noah's Ark* (1928) is actually a sound movie, the only exception in the group.

59 A subdivision close to the one presented by Reinhartz 2013a regarding the Bible.

reconstitutions. This genre almost ended with the advent of sound, having already entered in decline previously.⁶⁰

On the other hand, the prevalence of films during the 1950s and 1960s and its almost disappearance after may be intrinsically connected with the appearance of television, which would slowly replace cinema as the preferable media of the public. It may also be connected to the decay, for instance in Italy, of the *peplum* genre, substituted by the Spaghetti Western.⁶¹ Mesopotamia and antiquity were only truly recovered on screen in the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the *peplum* genre was resuscitated. Examples of this resurrection are, as we have seen, the movies *Gladiator* (2000) and *Alexander* (2004).⁶²

0.3 Orientalism and the Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia

It is impossible to speak about Mesopotamia and the way it was perceived by the so-called “Western civilization” without mentioning the concept of Orientalism. But even before we understand what is meant by this concept, highly analyzed within Culture Studies by the eminent professor of literature Edward Said,⁶³ we must understand how the division between these two constructs was characterized, placing the West on the one side and the East on the other. The term *Orient* emerged as a European conception to designate primarily Asia but also a part of North Africa.⁶⁴ By the geography it covers it is possible to understand that when it first appeared it carried a strong political connotation. Likewise, the terms *Middle East* and *Near East*, in the beginning interchangeable, appeared in the course of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century, in order to fragment this great *Orient* into different parts where distinct geopolitical interests were played commanded by the European and North-American authorities.⁶⁵ Although the term *Near East*, which described the region that was closest to Europe and with which it had to deal with more thoroughly, has fallen into disuse in political contexts and in the media, it is still applied today, especially in academic contexts, to designate this geographical area during the pre-Islamic period.⁶⁶ Hence our use of the term in the present volume.

A clear distinction was then drawn within this region having time as a divider, its frontier being the advent of Islam. In this sense, the *Middle East*, which during the twentieth century commonly referred to the region whose center was the Persian Gulf, remained a term to reference that geographical area since the seventh century AD until the present time, and, in contrast, the term *Mesopotamia* was adopted to designate the same area before it. So, *Mesopotamia* – today’s Republic of Iraq and small areas of Syria, Turkey, and Iran – was associated with dead civilizations, the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and the empires and communities that followed its

⁶⁰ Lanzoni 2002, p. 42.

⁶¹ And with the Italian political context. Vide Part II, Chapter 6.

⁶² About the third golden age of *peplum*, vide Éloy 2013, p. 61.

⁶³ With his *magnus opus Orientalism* (Said 1978).

⁶⁴ Sanmartín and Serrano 2003, p. 9.

⁶⁵ Matthews 2003, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Bahrani 1998, p. 165.

demise and which contacted with it, the Persians, the Jews, the Hellenes, and the Romans, who, in a way, were the antecedents of European/Western culture itself. As Bahrani states, “This revival of a name applied to the region in the European Classical tradition came to underscore the Babylonian/Assyrian position within the Western historical narrative of civilisation as the remoter, malformed, or partially formed, roots of European culture which has its telos in the flowering of Western culture and, ultimately, the autonomous modern Western man,”⁶⁷ In fact, the European classical traditional term *Mesopotamia*, resuscitated in the twentieth century, was first used in Alexandrian times to name one of his satrapies, as referred to by Arian in *Anabasis of Alexander*.⁶⁸ Oddly enough, Mesopotamia is a foreign concept and one that is in its genesis geopolitical and *Western*. Notwithstanding, the Mesopotamians themselves sometimes referred to their own land as the *māt bīrītīm* or as the *bīrit nārim*, according to some judicial documents,⁶⁹ that is, “the land in between” or the “between the river” respectively, concepts somewhat similar to the one the Greeks applied to the region.⁷⁰ If we take into account that the Tigris and the Euphrates structured and embodied the area, consisting of two living arteries, this fact is not surprising. The *māt bīrītīm* would thus comprehend present Iraq and some parts of Syria.

Over time, the culture of the first civilization set in the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates – comprised by Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians – which invented the wheel, writing, laws, astrological observations, and so many other technologies,⁷¹ would be absorbed by the classical actors and the Jewish population and through them would become the core of European culture. Indeed, the Greeks, to whom the foundations of western European culture are normally attributed, had “significantly ‘mesopotamianized’ already long before the conquests of Alexander.”⁷² Interestingly, despite being reviled both by their classic heirs and by the biblical account, Assyrians and Babylonians were studied and their history thoroughly debated⁷³ because they were in fact the *other* that composed the *self*, that is, the past cultural legacy comprised of the first creations at the dawn of time that passed from the cradle of civilization to its neighboring regions like a civilizing torch.⁷⁴ And this idea takes us back to *Orientalism*. Since the Mesopotamian past was understood as constituting the most remote roots of Europe itself and of the Western civilization, it was claimed by these as an integral part of its mythical origin. Therefore, when Mesopotamia was first unearthed and rose from the oblivion, during the nineteenth century, it became intrinsically inseparable from the orientalist notions that were launched upon it – the West was not a mere passive agent of its discovery but an active part in its appropriation. In other words, Mesopotamia and the scientific discipline of

67 Idem, *ibidem*.

68 Finkelstein 1962, p. 73.

69 Idem, p. 74.

70 Matthews 2003, p. 5.

71 Curiously, even the very concepts of universalism and imperialism, which Europe would be fond of during its era of expansionism were, in their genesis, eastern (Pagden 2008, p. 11).

72 Parpola 2000b, p. 34.

73 Vide Kuhrt 1995a.

74 Bahrani 1998, p. 162.

Assyriology⁷⁵ were born hostages of the era of colonialism and imperialism and deeply imbibed in a Eurocentric logic. Europe was not only committed to colonizing the present but also the past itself.

As Said pointed out, “The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture,”⁷⁶ and this assumption made “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”⁷⁷ by scaling the relation between West and East in terms of superiority and inferiority. After all, as Valerie Kennedy notes, the “imperial project emphasized the sense of Western superiority to Oriental cultures that already characterized 18th-century Western conceptualizations of the East and that is described by Said as the view that Westerners are ‘rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, [and] without natural suspicion,’ while those from the East are ‘none of these things.’”⁷⁸ By extension, these notions were projected over the past. The people of ancient Assyria and Babylonia lived in an embryonic form of society, a sort of pre-form civilization, leading a malformed political life, commanded by despotic and idolatrous rulers who defended and instilled brutal moral values. Hence, just as the Ottoman society needed to be saved by the West from its barbarism, so the past needed to be rescued from its moral decay.

As soon as the first discoveries were unearthed in the soil of ancient Assyria, the Western *idea*,⁷⁹ the *dream*⁸⁰ of Assyria that the Greco-Roman texts and the Old Testament had nurtured for centuries and which now materialized, took shape. These discoveries, automatically considered an integral part of the European heritage, could only be scrutinized and appropriated, transported to the museums of London, Paris, and Berlin, where they could attest to the public, in what is a remarkable imperialistic discourse, the political dominion of the European nations and their conquests of *today* and of *yesterday*. Did not Rudyard Kipling recall, celebrating Queen Victoria’s jubilee in an exquisite poem in 1897, the glory of England by associating it with its Mesopotamian past? – “Far-called, our navies melt away;/On dune and headland sinks the fire:/Lo, all our pomp of yesterday/Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!/Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,/Lest we forget—lest we forget!”⁸¹ said the writer.

Nowadays, as we witness the destruction of monuments, cities, and artifacts of the ancient Near East, as Paul Collins pointed out, we are inundated with messages of horror and disbelief. This response is not just related to the brutality of the acts of profanity, but above all to the fact that those monuments and relics are perceived as part of the roots of modern Europe.⁸² Summarizing, Mesopotamia as seen until today, especially in popular culture, cannot be dissociated from the orientalist notions that claimed it as an inferior civilization, deserving to be condemned and in need of rescue, but above all as an integral part of the mythical European roots.

75 The year 1857, after the declaration of the deciphering of the cuneiform script, is usually considered to mark the birth of Assyriology, a specialized discipline in the study of ancient Mesopotamia.

76 Said 1978, p. 2.

77 Idem, p. 3.

78 Kennedy 2017 p. 4.

79 Esposito 2011, p. 2.

80 Bohrer 2003, p. 3.

81 About the poem, vide Gilmour 2019, *The Prophet’s Burden*.

82 Collins 2020, p. x.

So, having this land as the central theme of our analysis and taking into account its almost total forgetfulness by academics who approach reception of antiquity in cinema, we set out with our study taking the following assumptions into account: the orientalist notions to which Mesopotamia was unable to escape, its dependence on classical and biblical narratives, and the scope of reception studies that will enable us to interpret the message underlying the film and its impact.

In order to assert itself, cinema needed to compete with other forms of cultural expression of the nineteenth century. Since its genesis, it has thus been forced to affirm itself culturally and artistically through communion and interaction with canonical arts such as photography, painting, sculpture, opera, and literature.⁸³ We cannot say, however, that it was a mere mimicry, but instead a true and necessary dialectic that led to its legitimation among European and American audiences. It is in this sense that we must return to the past before entering the cinematographic universe of the twentieth century. The tragedies, paintings, and operas produced about Mesopotamia for centuries were among the influences that cinema collected to convey the reality of the past. Besides, the cinema was also influenced by the archaeological discoveries in the Mediterranean and in the Near East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This wave of new cultural and material finds needed an authentication that only a realistic reproduction like the one that cinema could offer was able to grant. In this context, the predilection of the early days of cinema for antiquity is partly explained.

Therefore, in the first part of the book, our analysis will focus on the artistic and literary interpretations of Mesopotamia that would deeply inspire cinematographic productions. We aim to understand how the history and culture of Mesopotamia were understood from the time of its first reception, with the Greeks and the Old Testament, until the present. The Classics and the biblical account offer the first idea of the land between the rivers. As we will have the opportunity to see, the idea forged during this time would persist over time, and so history and myth would be forever tied and undistinguishable. The first chapter will show how ancient legends emerged, what was their purpose, and how their romanticism prevailed in the imagination of the Westerner. During the twentieth century it was not necessary to speak of the historical kings of antiquity, but of the folklore tradition of men and women of power that the classical era produced. Indeed, what was important was to emphasize the stereotype of the other that Mesopotamia always represented to the so-called “West.” The second chapter will deal with the Early Modern period and the literary works and musicalized operas that scaled during this era concerning Mesopotamia. Drama was the key during this time, with the emergence of tragic heroes and heroines who distinguished themselves by the moral and political values (fair or not) they defended. Tragic death and punishment were two aspects discussed and introduced in these artistic creations, which would also later be the subject of debate in the cinema. The final chapter of this section deals with the height of Mesopotamia’s archaeological rediscovery. There is a

83 Regarding this subject, vide Michelakis and Wyke 2013b, pp. 5–6.

significant difference between what was thought of Mesopotamia before and after the excavations. However, in general terms, the notions formed over millennia persisted. Above all, art introduced new elements that would also be evident on cinema screens and that transmitted for the first time a more realistic image of this civilization. All these different aspects were, in some way, collected by film producers and screenwriters.

The second part of our book will focus on the analysis of the films themselves. To this end, we decided to divide the study into several chapters that deal with different aspects of this civilization. In Chapter 6, we will study the architecture and landscape of Mesopotamia, focusing on three different poles: the palace, the temple, and the tower. The interest is to understand how each of them has a message to convey about the society and the governing elite. In fact, in a certain way, in the architecture, in its grandeur, aesthetics, and construction, is mirrored the civilization, and as such it constitutes a *discursive* prop of cinema, carrying a message that should be absorbed by the viewer. In Chapter 7, the political, religious, and social life of the land between the rivers will be the focus. The interplay between the government and the population, as well as the relationship between priesthood and monarchy, gives us clues as to the reasons that led to Mesopotamia's final downfall. What matters most is to understand the character's behavior. And in this regard the *fascist* conduct of the Mesopotamian monarchs transported the viewers of the mid-1950s, for instance, to the recent past. At the same time, the idolatrous behavior of the high priests demonstrated this civilization's lack of a strong religious moral. It is thus necessary to understand the political and religious message that cinema had to offer about antiquity and how it exposed the anxieties of its own time, both about faith and about leadership. In Chapter 8, the fundamental point of analysis will be the representation of women and their role. The portrayal of women on screen accompanied the development of the movements of female emancipation and the reservations society had in relation to these. The idea of a subversive Oriental woman and an obedient Western one helped to understand the degenerative character of Mesopotamia, in what might be considered an implicit orientalist message. Judith and Semiramis helped to expose this contrast, as well as the goddess Ishtar and the rituals performed in her honor. All contributed to the idea that the Mesopotamian woman was in need of saving and correction, an aspect that reflected society itself.

Hence, we have opted for an analysis of film content and not of production. Nevertheless, Chapter 4 will be dedicated to the study of the cinematographic centers, especially Hollywood and Cinecittà, of how they dealt with the political and social transformations that occurred throughout the twentieth century, and how they constrained or not their creations.⁸⁴ As we know, Mesopotamia, Babylon, and the characters associated with them have the extraordinary ability to easily metamorphose, assuming themselves as a linguistic resource, camouflaging themselves in different-style figures often used to express situations that are alien to them, but in which they are reviewed. Thus, either we find them as a metaphor, as a euphemism, or as an allegory. This will also be a focal point of our analysis, especially with regard to such films that we categorized earlier as *Mesopotamia in film* and which will be covered in

84 Vide above, note 57.

Chapter 5. Indeed, out of Mesopotamia came the biblical metaphor “whore of Babylon” applied to many contexts and visible in various cinematographic productions. Everything that was evil was likely to have emerged from the land between the rivers. Evil, consummated in the figure of the Devil or the Antichrist, is one of the aspects that will be studied and that underline very well the twentieth-century conception on Mesopotamia.

To finalize, we include Chapter 9, named “Farewell Babylon, Farewell Nineveh,” which, in addition to summarizing some of the ideas presented throughout the work, addresses how the fall of Babylon and Assyria has always been associated with the excesses of their population and monarchs, and the consequent divine punishment that fell upon them. Through this final chapter, we also intend to highlight how Mesopotamia has always been presented in the cinema as the other, both from a cultural (expressing an implicit orientalism) and from a religious point of view (its polytheism opposing the European and American Judeo-Christian matrix). Cinema was, in fact, marked by these two perspectives: the Westernism that was in its blood and the idea of its salvific faith.