Nunt. Antiquus, Belo Horizonte, v. 17, n. 2, p. 17-28, 2021

Classical Reception online

Recepção Clássica online

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Abstract: The impact of the social web on Classical Reception Studies has been vast and varied. This paper is a personal reflection on the influence of such tech-driven phenomena as mass digitization, database projects, social media, commercial web platforms and blogs on the thriving sub-discipline of classical reception. It discusses several online initiatives that have made their mark on the discipline, and also introduces some recent and future initiatives, which track methodological progress from the social (Web 2.0) to the semantic web (3.0).

Keywords: classical reception, web resources, digitization, databases, social media.

Resumo: O impacto da rede *web* nos Estudos de Recepção Clássica tem sido vasto e variado. Este artigo é uma reflexão pessoal sobre a influência de fenómenos técnicos como a digitação massiva, os projetos de *database*, as redes sociais, as plataformas *web* comerciais e os blogues, sobre a promissora subdisciplina da recepção clássica. Aqui se discute várias iniciativas online que deixaram a sua marca nesta disciplina, além de se apresentar algumas iniciativas recentes e em preparação, que proporcionam um progresso metodológico das redes sociais (Web 2.0) para as redes semânticas (Web 3.0).

Palavras-chave: recepção clássica, fontes *web*, digitalização, *database*, redes sociais.

Classical Reception Studies has benefitted greatly from passing through its disciplinary adolescence in the age of the social web, or Web 2.0. While it would be impossible for one person to enumerate the benefits in any unbiased and systematic way without dedicating several

eISSN: 1983-3636
DOI: 10.35699/1983-3636.2021.35082

years to the topic, I hope the following examples taken from my own necessarily limited experience might at least offer one reflection against which others can compare their own. I ought to make plain from the outset that I am not a Digital Humanities (DH) scholar, although I did some DH training during my PhD and have some experience of basic coding and web design. I am therefore not writing from the position of an expert so much as from the perspective of a general "end-user" of commercial hard- and softwares, who happens also to be a classical reception scholar. I am also, of course, severely limited by my own "horizon", as one of our discipline's forefathers, Hans-Georg Gadamer, might have put it, i.e. one person with their own limited range of experience and interests. The web may be global in some senses, but it would be a mistake to pretend that we all experience the same web. However transformed, traditional boundaries including linguistic, social, cultural and, to a degree, geographical barriers still apply in this other communicative realm, which is increasingly now seen as a large part of "Real Life".

I was among the first generation of classical reception PhDs, by which I mean, my thesis was on the reception of antiquity, rather than being a Classicist by PG training who then goes on to work on reception topics. I began my doctoral studies at Open and Oxford Universities in 2008, under the supervision of Profs. Lorna Hardwick (Open) and Stephen Harrison (Oxford). My first example of web supported classical reception then might be the fact that I used to submit my monthly reports to them via a blog, which felt quite exotic at the time. However impractical it might seem now, it does remind me that there was definitely *something in the air*, something that was changing not only the way we communicated but also the way we worked in academia. When I look back on those years now, from a pandemic perspective, I see with fondness the clumsy multitasking and ramshackle interface between online searchable texts and the piles of books in the library with its cork floor tiles and buzzing lights. Reading online/onscreen was not yet normalised, so I used to print out my copies of British Romantic-era poems and bind them together with cereal boxes, staples and gaffer tape.

Even though text digitisation began in the 1970s with the launch of Project Gutenberg, it was not until the turn of the millennium that mass digitisation really took hold and importantly became accessible on a researcher's "home computer" or laptop. Every country has its own digitisation history, it seems, but in the UK it at least felt like the period leading up to and during my PhD (2008-2011) was especially frenetic in terms of distributing digitized texts online and open source. Since the literature I was studying was mainly early 19th-century, there was no copyright to worry about, so libraries and other organisations were scanning and uploading thousands of texts, which might have otherwise been obscure and hard to access at that time, even in the best-stocked research libraries. With an online search (I tended to use Google Books) limited to 1780-1830, I could scour mind-boggling quantities of Romantic texts for terms such as "Catullus" (Cf. STEAD, 2015).[1] By crossreferencing these against online library catalogues, e.g. Copac (now Jisc Library Hub Discover), I could get a fairly true sense of what had been published in the UK related to my research project.

Although it took some time for the digitized texts to become reliably searchable (some texts were easier for Optical Character Recognition (OCR) text readers to decipher than others) it still meant that I was moving considerably faster through my primary and paratextual materials than would have been previously possible. The proto-Classical Receptionists of the mid-20th century, i.e. people who conducted those learned studies that showed the connections between ancient and modern texts, sometimes referred to as "source studies", required extensive literary experience and an unusually good memory.[2] This kind of connection spotting has obviously been, and perhaps continues to be, a cherished element of more traditional classical philology. The connections between texts can seem especially important when social context is so severely limited. At the turn of the millennium, it became increasingly possible for the humble postgraduate student with a passion

[1] https://discover.libraryhub.jisc.ac.uk/

[2] In my area, i.e. Reception of Catullus, such studies were mcpeek (1939), and harrington (1923).

for poetry to use consumer technology to replicate this formerly eccentric gift of being able to see the sometimes subtle connections between texts.

It might also be the case that a consequence of this technological advancement was that this formerly learned ability began to lose its value. The aim could no longer be simply to note down, or 'spot' the connections, but to analyse and interpret their wider significance. Due to the relative abundance of social context, when examining modern texts, it became quickly clear that a good deal could be done, and done quickly, in the sub-field of Classical Reception Studies. It might be worth noting that this alerts us to a central feature (or is it a mantra?) of a classical reception study, i.e. that the relationship between old and new should not only be identified and described but also used as an opportunity to explore the context into which the ancient object, text or idea has 'landed'. According to the much-loved dialogic model of reception, on top of learning about the reception context and contemporary attitudes towards antiquity, we can also use this new angle or way of seeing to reassess, and potentially reinterpret, the ancient object in its originary context (and thus help generate our own latest contemporary reception of it) in light of the temporally and culturally bound hermeneutic moment under investigation (HARDWICK, 2020).

The advent of the searchable, online text therefore seems to me to be the most important contribution of "the internet" to Classical Reception Studies, and this is not only for the heightened capacity to see the connections between things. The same search tools can also be used to widen a search and develop a broader and richer picture of the cultural context in which a specific "reception", or engagement with classical culture, took place. A researcher could, for example, relatively quickly develop a good sense of the critical heritage of a reception, which might also reveal, for example, generally held attitudes towards the ancient object, text or idea, or even classical culture more broadly, across the political spectrum, as it is represented in journals and newspapers with their own cultural priorities and political affiliations. Although the other nails had been hammered long ago, the arrival of open source, mass-digitized, searchable texts was the final nail in the coffin for bibliographies, concordances and collected editions of critical heritage. While people still find value in the materiality of a novel or

collection of poems, fewer will lament the loss of the encyclopedia and other such reference works.

Yet the 2000s were also the age of the user-generated online database. A few pioneering groups of scholars laboured away to create databases of classical reception. The two foremost of these projects in the UK are Prof. Lorna Hardwick's *Classical Receptions in Drama and Poetry in English from c.1970 (CRDP)* and University of Oxford's *Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD)*, led by Prof. Fiona Macintosh. *CRDP*, which is still freely available and searchable online, presents material on the Reception of Greek Drama and Poetry, mainly in English, from c. 1970 to 2005 (Cf. CLASSICAL Receptions..., 2021). It is a searchable database of poetry and performances of classical literature and drama, with comments on staging, translations, adaptations etc, and also a number of excellent critical essays focusing on the use of modern sources and a selection of project publications. The *APGRD* still forms the hub of Oxford's classical reception research community, and the archive of performances – both physical and digital holdings – is an essential resource for any student or researcher investigating the performance history of a classical play, or the reception in dramatic form of classical literature (Cf. ARCHIVE..., 2021).

I advised that my perspective would be limited. In writing this report I have noticed how I have been drawn to highlight the more heavily developed databases that happen to correspond to my own region and research interests. I cannot be in any way comprehensive, but I ought briefly to flag a few of the exciting web-based classical reception projects, which are developing in other areas further from my specialism. *The Eumenides Project* (Open University of Cyprus), for example, is busy cataloguing and analysing the "multifarious ways in which ancient Greek tragedy and tragic myth have been adapted, reinterpreted, revised, or re-imagined in modern Greek poetry and theatre from the late 19th century to the present day" (LIAPIS; PETRIDES; PAVLOU, 2012). *Classical Influences and Irish Culture* (Aarhus University) is a major European Research Council-funded project led by Prof. Isabelle Torrance, which hosts a growing database aiming to "record published translations, adaptations, and literary works inspired by classical sources

in both English and Irish languages" (TORRANCE *et al*., 2021) in order to examine the influence of the classical on Irish culture. *Classicizing Chicago* (Northwestern University) is a smaller city-based project that "researches, contextualizes, analyzes and provides digital open-access to evidence of the diversity of 'classicizing' activity in metropolitan Chicago". The team, led by Prof. Sara Monoson, investigates how "classical references project views of the distinctiveness of Chicago as a quintessentially American global metropolis and how far those views are inclusive or not" (MONOSON *et al*., 2021).

In the 2010s, it became significantly easier for people to create their own small-scale but serviceable web archives using consumer softwares, e.g. WordPress.[3] This has enabled several classical reception scholars, including Prof. Edith Hall and myself, not only to present research materials in an accessible format to the wider public, but also to benefit from dialogue with individuals and interest groups, whom we might otherwise never have met. *Classics and Class* began life as an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project based at King's College, London. Its primary aims were to explore the relationship between classical culture and social class, and to present and amplify the lost voices of British working-class men and women who engaged with ancient Greek and Roman culture from 1789-1917 (Cf. CLASSICS..., 2021). The *Classics and Class* (C&C) website adapted (some might say "hacked") an off-the-peg, online shopping interface, and used the price and comment features to enable both date-limiting searches and public dialogue respectively. Sometimes living relatives of our subjects of study have contacted us and provided us with fascinating information we might not have come across via traditional research methods.

We also used the *C&C* website to disseminate our research via web videos, blogs and podcasts, in addition to traditional long-form essays. The *Classics and Class* project resulted in two book-length publications *A People's History of Classics* (Routledge, 2020) and *Ancient Greek and Roman Classics and the British Struggle for Social Reform* (Bloomsbury, 2015). Even though much of the primary material

[3] *Classicizing Chicago* is a good example.

for this project was found by traditional archival research techniques, close reading, and historical and literary analysis, it was greatly enriched by the use of online digital search and communication tools.

Our ability to unearth previously obscure areas of research highlights another benefit of the web on our discipline more broadly. This may not be limited to classical reception, but it may well be of interest to readers of this journal. The ability for people to share research interests outside of traditional publications and broadcast media has enabled previously marginalised constituencies to find voice and momentum towards improving the diversity and inclusivity of the discipline. Women scholars are now more prominent in the ostensibly male-dominated discipline thanks to the efforts of the Women's Classical Committee (WCC), which has made major steps towards redressing gender imbalance through their Wikipedia editing sessions, which has resulted in over 200 biographies of women classicists (Cf. WOMEN'S..., 2021). Those who have for too long found themselves operating at the margins of our discipline due to the prejudices associated with social class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, have organised globally via online platforms, e.g. WCC, Everyday Orientalism and several social media groups, and are bringing fresh and critically informed insights and energy to the discipline (Cf. EVERYDAY..., 2021; QUEER ,,,, 2021). The web is also facilitating and enhancing the ways that University departments can respond to such groundswells, e.g. the Warwick Classics Network's Public Bibliography on Black Lives Matter and BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) (Cf. DOUGHTY, 2020). What this means for reception studies is that many students and scholars are now examining the relationship between various social categories and the classics, and investigating the role that classical culture and the discipline of Classics has historically played in shoring up and exporting social division. These are very healthy conversations to be having in our discipline.

One online resource that the *Classics and Class* project benefitted from greatly was the Open University's *Reading Experience Database, UK* (RED UK). This is the largest resource recording experiences of reading in the world, and it is building towards a future in which literary studies are not necessarily limited to a canon of endorsed authors, but

the history of reading will extend to and represent the actual reading habits of diverse readerships across society. In the 2010s, I could search the database's 30,000+ reading experiences, gleaned from the testimony of readers, both famous and anonymous – and everywhere in between. From this Web 2.0 foundation, was born in 2018 the Web 3.0 *Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool (READ-IT)* project, which continues to develop an open access, semantically-enriched tool that will use techniques such as crowd-sourcing and web-crawling to harvest data about reading in Europe (Cf. READING..., 2021). This AI-enhanced tool is intended to enable "scholars and ordinary readers to retrieve information from a vast amount of community-generated digital data leading to new understanding about the circumstances and effects of reading in Europe" (ABOUT…, 2021). It is not a classical reception project per se, but it is my hope that this tool will in time further deepen our understanding of how people from all walks of life have accessed and enjoyed (or not) the classical world via the written, or perhaps better "read" word.

The gradual shift of importance from author to reader may also be emblematic of wider trends in classical reception. It is a dream of a few, and not such a fanciful one, that we might be able to conduct genuine audience reception studies, which will enable access to cultural history with significantly reduced levels of bias, driven by often class-based assessments of quality, which currently tend to divide culture according to the wholly unsatisfactory binary of "popular" and "elite". In short, we are learning how to look at cultural history differently, and emergent digital technologies are dramatically helping us to do it.

The line between "popular" and "elite" culture has perhaps never been more blurry, now that everyone with a strong enough internet connection can watch versions or adaptations of ancient Greek and Roman plays, or performances of poetry on YouTube. This kind of thing has of course happened before, the radio age (in some countries), for example, ushered in a new democratic channel for the distribution of culture. Film and TV likewise. New technology has always heralded this potential for inclusivity. I am reminded of the Dial-A-Poem project by John Giorno's Poetry Systems, which shared newly composed poems by the likes of

Allen Ginsberg and Patti Smith via the cutting-edge technology of the telephone answering machine. But there is perhaps something unique about the unbridled and self-selected access to culture that YouTube and other video sharing platforms provide. One example of how this affects classical reception studies is that through such communicative "new media", not only can audiences find the latest classical receptions from all over the world, but also creative practitioners can collaborate across oceans and continents. After stumbling on a video of my collaborative audio-visual translation of Catullus 63, entitled "a t t i s", Prof. Rodrigo Tadeu Gonçalves (Universidade Federal do Paraná), who plays in a band called Pecora Loca, contacted me and we shared our experience of reanimating classical poetry in performance and using music and video (Cf. STEAD, 2010). With increasing levels of access to the ideas and sensibilities of contemporary creative practitioners, via such projects as *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* (Open University), as well as to performances – both live and recorded – themselves, there are countless opportunities for students to conduct well-informed reception case studies, integrating discussion of texts, performances and paratextual materials, e.g. reviews and interviews, with their own experience of the social context in which they live (Cf. PRACTITIONERS'..., 2021).

Another online project in the wings, which will have serious repercussions for the pedagogy of classical reception studies, is the *Oxford Classical Reception Commentaries*, an Oxford University Press initiative, co-directed by Profs. Lorna Hardwick, Stephen Harrison and Elizabeth Vandiver. The *OCRC* project uses the *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online* platform, on which students and scholars will be enabled to read English poetic texts with online commentary illustrating the presence of allusion and reference to the Greek and Roman classics within them, and clarifying their function.

My final example of how classical reception studies has been affected by our new digital world will be especially obvious for those of us in various stages of lockdown. While our physical liberties have been curtailed by a Coronavirus, our capacity to live and communicate online

has, among many sections of society, undoubtedly flourished.[4] It was my great pleasure during what in Britain we call "the first lockdown" in Spring and Summer 2020 to have been in regular contact with Brazilian and Portuguese colleagues as facilitator of the Classical Reception Studies Network's *Lusophone Blog Takeover* (Cf. LUSOPHONE…, 2020). From June to October eight blog posts were released, shining a spotlight on the classical reception activity in Portugal, Brazil and Mozambique. It has been wonderful to learn of the state of the discipline across these regions, and I thank the Takeover Editors, Profs. Maria de Fátima Silva and Susana Marques Pereira (University of Coimbra, Portugal), and Prof. Tereza Virgínia Ribeiro Barbosa (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte), for their industrious and enlightening collaboration. The aim of the CRSN is to promote Classical Reception Studies in the UK, but we are consistently looking outwards both to learn from and support our colleagues abroad. We have in January 2021 launched an African Takeover, with a guest editor team spanning Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, and have previously hosted an Australasian blog series, edited by classical receptionists from the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. It is a joy to see the international network grow, and if any readers of this learned journal would like to contact members of the CRSN for advice or support, you are most welcome to do so via the usual social media channels or the online form on our website (Cf. CLASSICAL Reception..., 2021).

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[4] It has also brought to light the phenomena of digital inequality and bandwidth poverty. Those that do not have access to online resources have become even more deprived during the global pandemic.

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Recebido em: 6 de julho de 2021.
Aprovado em: 26 de julho de 2021.