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A Round-Trip Ticket to the Underworld: The Classical Theme of Katabasis in Modern Cinema

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Fdo. Manuel López Muñoz

A ROUND-TRIP TICKET TO THE UNDERWORLD: THE CLASSICAL THEME OF THE *KATABASIS* IN MODERN CINEMA

Alicia Cerezueta Rodríguez

'Nihil novum sub sole' (Ecclesiastes 1.9)

ABSTRACT

This essay is a study on the continuity of the Classical theme of the *katabasis* (κατάβασις, *descensus ad inferos*) in cinematographic productions in the past years. To do so, we have made a selection of films from different genres that will be compared to the myths in which *katabasis* appears and analyzed in order to show if the theme is presented in the same way as in the original myth, if there have been variations, its relevance for the development of the plot and the consequences that it entails. Although this theme serves as an essential element in epic poems; in cinema it appears in different genres. The cinema genres chosen for this study are fantasy, thriller and science-fiction films. The fundamental aim is to prove that nowadays resources from the Greek and Latin mythology are still useful for cinema, and specifically, the theme of the descent to the Underworld, or Hell.

Keywords: *katabasis*, Classical tradition, *descensus ad inferos*, Underworld, descent, cinema.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo es un estudio sobre la pervivencia del recurso temático clásico de la catábasis (descenso a los infiernos) en producciones cinematográficas de los últimos años. Para ello, se hará una selección de películas de distintos géneros que se compararán con los mitos en los que aparece la catábasis y se analizará si el recurso se presenta de la misma manera que en el mito original o si se han producido variaciones, su relevancia en el desarrollo de la trama y las consecuencias que conlleva. Aunque este recurso es característico de la épica, en el cine se puede encontrar en distintos géneros. Los géneros que se van a tratar son: cine fantástico, thriller y ciencia ficción. El objetivo fundamental es demostrar que hoy en día se siguen utilizando recursos de la mitología grecolatina en el cine, y en concreto, el recurso del descenso al Inframundo, o Infierno.

Palabras clave: katábasis, catábasis, tradición clásica, descenso al infierno, inframundo, cine.

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Alicia Cerezuela Rodríguez

'Nihil novum sub sole' (Ecclesiastes 1.9)

1 Introduction

Nowadays, the incredible technological development allows us to do things that were unthinkable, if not impossible, a few decades ago. The unlimited access to information that we enjoy today has reduced our capacity of surprise: information is one click away; we are bored of the 'classic', we long for originality and innovation.

Cinema has become, if at first an entertainment, now an art, to the extent that it has been considered the seventh art since Ricciotto Canudo¹ first coined the term in 1912. And the art of cinema, as the rest of arts, sometimes is shocking, sometimes makes us reflect, sometimes is entertaining and sometimes borrows elements from other arts or artistic tendencies (King 2012 :154):

For Canudo, cinema was a medium that synthesized the principles of other arts, going beyond them to achieve 'superb conciliation of the Rhythms of Space (the Plastic Arts) and the Rhythms of Time (Music and Poetry)'.

A non-cultivated audience may consider an original creation some elements with an obvious Classical origin. This is the starting point of my study on Classical tradition and cinema: how cinema still feeds on Classical tradition and, particularly, on the theme of the *katabasis*, that is, the descent of the hero to Hell.

¹ Ricciotto Canudo (1877-1923), one of the earliest film theoreticians, coined the term in his manifestos "The Birth of the Sixth Art" (1911) and "Reflections on the Seventh Art" (1926).

1.1 Methodology and justification

The main focus of this study is to analyze several films from different genres in order to establish the presence of the Classical theme of the *katabasis* in modern and contemporary cinema.

As we will see in the following pages, Classical tradition is still an essential source for arts and, in this study, we deal with *katabasis* in particular. *Katabasis* is the hero's descent to Hell. It appears in two of the most important epic poems of Ancient literature: Vergil's *Aeneid* VI and Homer's *Odyssey* XI, although it can also be found in other myths, such as those of Orpheus and Eurydice, and Castor (Κάστωρ) and Polydeuces or Pollux (Πολυδεύκης), also known in Greek mythology as 'the *Dioskouroi*' (Διόσκουροι) or 'the sons of Zeus' (González Serrano 1999: 2).

Our analysis of the *katabasis* will rely upon a close reading of Vergil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Odyssey*. The idea is to show how film directors and scriptwriters still resort to the Classics in search of structural elements useful for the film plot. Consequently, Aristotle's idea of *mimesis* (Aristotle, *Poet.* 1450b 16²: 'ἡ γὰρ τραγωδία μίμησις ἐστὶν οὐκ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ πράξεων καὶ βίου') plays an important role in the following analysis as well the type of *mimesis* that we will find: *aemulatio*, *imitatio* or *interpretatio*.

Dr López Muñoz defines the three types of *mimesis* as follows (1991: 114):

'Preferimos hablar de aemulatio cuando las coincidencias entre un texto y otro dominan fundamentalmente en el nivel del contenido; consideramos que existe imitatio si, además, hay una razonable carga de coincidencias en el subnivel estilístico, y hablaremos de interpretatio cuando todas estas convergencias se produzcan también en el subnivel formal.'

As a matter of fact, this classification can be adapted and extrapolated to our study. In the analysis of *mimesis* in films, we can see that an *aemulatio* would be the films in which the coincidences appear at the level of content, that is, those in which the idea of the *katabasis* (the hero's journey to gain knowledge or to rescue someone) is present. *Imitatio*, then, consists of the coincidences at the level of content and stylistics: how we recognize the same elements or sentences from the original text, through

² 'Tragedy is not a representation of men but of a piece of action, of life, of happiness and unhappiness'. Translation by W.H. Fyfe. In Aristotle. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 23, translated by W.H. Fyfe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1932).

references to a descent or to Hell, for example, or visual resemblances (usually through metaphors and symbolisms). Finally the coincidences at all levels form an *interpretatio*: resemblances in the character's names, physical appearance, including the same elements as in the original myth (the river, the boat, ghosts and souls, among others), and the same setting (the Underworld or world of the dead).

How do directors use and interpret the idea of the descent to the Underworld? Which elements do they include? Are those elements presented in the same way as in the Classical literary works? What is the purpose of the *katabasis* in the plot? All these questions will be answered through the analysis of several films: fantasy, thriller and science-fiction films. The reason why I have selected these genres is that I want to show how *katabasis* can be adapted depending on the film genre. *Katabasis* is not for one genre only; it can be found in a fantasy film as *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Gore Verbinski, 2007) as well as in a detective thriller as *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991).

However, and even though directors reinterpret and represent *katabasis* in a different way from the original source, we have to bear in mind that not every film fits *katabasis*.

Behind this study, there are hours of investigation and reflection in order to develop an objective and appropriate method of analysis. Finding a movie with a similar theme is not enough; we have to analyze it carefully to see if more *katabatic* elements appear, the way in which they do, whether they are relevant or not, etc.

This is why I have chosen Professor Holtsmark's work 'The *Katabasis* Theme in Modern Cinema' (in Winkler 2001: 22-50) as the cornerstone of my essay. The structure is the following: first he defines *katabasis* and its pattern, and then he selects movies from different genres to compare them to the *katabasis*. In his analysis, he summarizes the plot of each film and pays attention to specific elements such as the setting, the characters, what they obtain in hell, symbolism of colors, names, clothes, etc.

His article has served me as the seminal work for my end-of-grade essay not only due to his method of analysis but also to become aware of 'the enduring nature of this underpinning myth' (Holtsmark 2001: 50).

However, there are other approaches towards *katabasis*. Joseph Campbell includes the *katabasis* as part of the monomyth (the journey of the hero): 'The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula

represented in the rites of passage: *separation – initiation – return*: which may be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth' (Campbell 2008: 23). Other experts, such as Sánchez Escalonilla (2005: 185-195), consider the descent to the Underworld in three different levels: 'Hades as an early encounter with death', as the 'Rescue from Hades' and the third level, 'Hell and Hero's purification', taking into account that these three levels can be interlaced. For instance, *katabasis* for the hero can be the rescue of a loved one from Hell and at the same time, it can bring him spiritual wealth, that is, *contaminatio* plays an important role. It depends on the level (or topic) that the director considers more useful for the plot.

In brief, the structure of this study is, first, the general definition of Classical tradition and the different tendencies, the definition of *katabasis* in the original works (pattern, characters, purpose, etc.), the selection of films and analysis of them, including the type of *mimesis* found, with an explanation of each genre and a short summary of each of the plots, and the conclusions we can draw from the relations between *katabasis* and cinema nowadays and Classical tradition and cinema in general.

1.2 What Classical tradition is

Before we go to the heart of the matter, the *katabasis* in cinema, it is important to define what we mean by Classical tradition and the different ways of studying it.

A definition of 'tradition' is "the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction" (Merriam Webster Dictionary, s. v.).

In fact, the concept of 'Classical Tradition' is rather problematic: Must we consider 'classical' only the works and authors from the Greco-Roman tradition? If so, the problem of how we must consider great authors from other ages arises. Following Curtius' ideas (1995: 35),

El pasaje de Aulo Gelio es muy instructivo: revela que el concepto de "escritor modelo" estaba subordinado en la Antigüedad al criterio gramatical de la corrección lingüística (...) El que un concepto tan fundamental de nuestra cultura como es el de clasicismo, del que tanto se ha hablado y usado, se remonte a un autor de la tardía latinidad, ya sólo conocido de los especialistas, es algo más que una simple curiosidad filológica; demuestra un hecho que ya hemos podido ver en muchas ocasiones: la importancia del azar en la historia de nuestra terminología literaria.

Consequently, Curtius states that ‘Classical tradition’ is the transmission or handing down of information from Classical authors, considering ‘classical’ the authors who deserve to be studied because of the quality of their works.

As Brockliss (2010: 1) says, it is a:

field in which material from classical antiquity to present day: literature, art, music, film... is included. [. . .] It is thus an inherently interdisciplinary field in its encompassing of a variety of departments and disciplines, each with its own canon, practices and shared working assumptions.

It is in this interdisciplinary field on which the study bases: how an element as the *katabasis* from the Ancient epic poems can be adapted and incorporated into a different field such as cinema.

The term ‘Classical tradition’ did not appear until the second half of the XIX century. It existed previously, but as García Jurado (2012) states, it still had not been formalized as a discipline.

As Prof. Laguna Mariscal (2004: 85) states, the term ‘Classical tradition’ was widely accepted and started to be used after the publication in 1949 of ‘The Classical Tradition’ by Gilbert Highet. However, the source from which Highet adopted the term seems to be ‘Virgilio nel medio evo’ by Domenico Comparetti (1872). According to Laguna Mariscal (2004: 87),

Para Comparetti, la «classical tradition» es simplemente el legado literario grecolatino, pagano, tal como se transmitió durante la Edad Media. Parece que Highet tomó la juntura léxica para adaptarla a un concepto ligeramente diferente: la influencia de la cultura clásica en el mundo moderno.

There are, indeed, different expressions to refer to Classical tradition: reception, heritage, influence, etc. Martindale (2010: 298) explains that the etymology of the word ‘tradition’ from the Latin *tradere* suggests ‘a handing down of material from the past to the present’. Reception has to do with the ‘active participation of readers in a two-way process’. He concludes, then, that ‘the boundary between them is a shifting one’, because it varies with the different authors and their methodology

In order to study Classical tradition there are three main tendencies that coincide with three historic periods. As Professor García Jurado (2013: 6) states,

...las etapas fundamentales de la disciplina, que hemos resumido en tres:

1872. Primera etapa: de la “tradición” a la “tradición clásica”;
1949. Segunda etapa: la “tradición clásica” como relato;
1979. Tercera etapa: la “tradición clásica (grecolatina)” y la “recepción”.

The first one, also known as *Quellenforschung*, search for sources or source criticism, consists of a direct comparison of the sources through the analysis of the content, form and stylistics; in other words, finding direct references to an author. It became a popular method of study in the nineteenth century although nowadays it has lost its importance.

‘Quellenforschung, is an often neglected and somewhat mistrusted tool of the ancient historian. Developed by the German in the nineteenth century, most notably and successfully as a means of uncovering the sources [. . .] Detailed attention is rarely devoted to it today as a discipline and historians are sometimes openly contemptuous of it. Without it, however, some of the most important discoveries in the Late Roman history would never have been made [. . .], and analysis of so complicated a work as Historia Augusta, for example, would have never been undertaken.’ (Burguess 1999: 114-115).

The loss of popularity experienced by this method is mainly due to the authors that misuse it. That is why some authors as Powell (1995: 7-8 in Burgess 1999: 115) state the following: *‘This word Quellenforschung tends now to be used pejoratively to refer to the mechanical method of searching for sources... there is nothing wrong with the analysis per-se, provided that it is done intelligently...’* [sic]. Burgess highlights the careful method that the scholar T. D. Barnes practices nowadays.

The second of them, which started in the late forties, headed by Highet, highlights the ‘influences’ of an author on another, but ‘no debe confundirse la “influencia” con la mera búsqueda de fuentes, cuyo método critica expresamente el propio Highet’ (García Jurado 2013: 11). This method implies a closer analysis, taking into account not only the direct references but also the relationships established between the authors and the way in which these relationships are influential.

It was the time when the term ‘Classical tradition’ started to be used and accepted. This second stage has been considered as the stage of the ‘consolidation’ (García Jurado 2013: 5) with Highet’s publication, as it has been stated previously. Highet’s method is mainly historiographical, that is, it is based on a historical perspective of the discipline with a focus on western literature, according to the different eras. Experts agree that Highet’s most important contribution to Classical tradition was precisely the coinage of this term.

Hight explains in the preface to *The Classical Tradition* (1949: viii) that there were no other works about the issue, since describing the process from a historical perspective is highly complicated. As a result, his aim was precisely that, ‘to provide such an outline’ of it.

Due to his study, he was able to prove that even though authors did not refer clearly to the ‘influences’ from the Classics in their works, they ‘still found that classical literature was of immense value to them as a challenge and a stimulus’ (Hight 1949: 543).

In short, through the study from a historical perspective, he concluded that:

‘the history of much of the best poetry and prose written in western countries is a continuous stream flowing from its source in Greece to the present day, and that that stream is one current in the continuous spiritual life of western man’ (Hight 1949: 545-546).

Finally, the last stage and, more recent, is ‘reception’, which focuses on the reinterpretation of the Classics, that is, how a new author perceives and represents the Classics, according to their own image of them.

Reception studies include all the new tendencies in Classical tradition, paying special attention to reception, postcolonial studies, gender or film, among others. Martindale (2006: 1) highlights the ‘change of attitude’ and ‘expansion of activities’ regarding reception in the past decades.

In short, ‘reception within classics encompasses all work concerned with postclassical material’. As it has been said before, it is a two-way process, and it is becoming the preeminent term to designate the study of the continuity of Classics over Classical tradition, especially in ‘*modern artistic forms or popular media like cinema, with a more open-ended conception of the Greco-Roman past*’ (Caruso and Laird 2013: 2). The idea of the two-way process bases on the consideration of the original work’s impact on the postclassical work and *vice versa*, that is, how we ‘*reach back in time and in a sense reconfigure that text*’ (Paul 2008: 307).

More specifically in cinema, reception studies have become popular recently due to ‘its use in teaching (particularly in higher education)’ (Paul 2008: 304). The basic methodology consists of the identification of a:

‘film (or films) which have an appreciable link with the ancient world [. . .] and then, to explore the film’s relationship with that ancient material, not simply with the aim of listing

similarities and differences between ancient and modern but with the intention of understanding what the reception –the film- can tell us about the receiving culture’s view of antiquity and of itself’ In short, to what uses is antiquity being put in a modern context? (Paul 2008: 307).

As a result, we can see that cinema is becoming an important field of study in the reception of the Classical tradition, among other popular media. The teaching of the Classics through cinema is increasing every day, to the extent that many universities offer courses on reception and cinema. One of its most important characteristics is that it is a two-way process, which allows a double analysis: from the original source to the postclassical work and the other way around, making possible a reinterpretation of the Classical text.

1.3 Cinema and Classical tradition

Remembering Blockliss’s words (2010: 1), Classical tradition is an interdisciplinary field, so that other arts or fields borrow elements from it. Cinema does it too, thus reflecting the ‘*fascination the Ancient world has always exerted on the popular imagination*’ (Winkler 2001: 3). Cinema and many other arts throughout History feed on Classical culture, and as result, we can demonstrate how alive the Classics are nowadays.

Even if Aristotle’s *Poetics* has nothing to do with cinema, as Blacker (1993 in Cano 1999: 14) states, its core contains a series of ideas which are indispensable for any playwright or scriptwriter nowadays. Scriptwriters look for structures, themes, stereotyped characters, etc. in the Classical works and among all these elements, the idea of the hero and his grandeur becomes more attracting to filmmakers and scriptwriters: the way in which he faces his destiny and the suffering that he goes through. That is why epic constitutes a perfect source of plots and patterns.

In his journey through life and suffering is where we find the heart of our study: the descent to the Underworld. However, there is a huge variety of cinema genres and film directors have to adapt these borrowed elements, remaining faithful to the original source or reinterpreting them:

'Una fidelidad que permite resúmenes salvajes y bastantes licencias, pero la necesidad de tomar decisiones entre lo que se manipula, lo que se elimina, lo que se añade y cómo se hace, todo ello, es parte de la función del autor: la contaminación³' (Cano 1999: 102).

As we are about to discover, *katabasis* is one of these elements that filmmakers include in their films, so that the idea of '*viaje como evolución psicológica con acceso a los infiernos está en el fondo de muchas epopeyas cinematográficas, por encima de su inspiración directa*' (Cano 1999: 90).

2 *Katabasis*: a Classical theme

Katabasis, from Greek κατὰ, "down" and βαίω "go" and in Latin "descensus ad Inferos" (Liddell Scott, s.v.), is a journey to Hell, to the Underworld or world of the dead. The idea of *katabasis*, as González Serrano states (1999: 129) is present in the funerary beliefs of most of civilizations:

Creencia generalizada en la antigüedad, era que los difuntos que habían vivido y sufrido mucho, estaban tan llenos de experiencia que, para recabar sus enseñanzas o una información precisa, era necesario descender y tener con ellos un encuentro personal.

As Hight states (1949: vi): '*The Greeks invented nearly all the literary patterns which we use, [. . .] others as powerful as a brave man's journey through hell. These themes and patterns they passed on to the Romans, who developed them and added much of their own*'.

Sometimes, to gain knowledge, it is necessary to go down to the Underworld, where the experienced relatives dwell, to find answers about the future or to find the courage to face destiny and the enemy. Tovar (2006: 46) also describes it as '*un proceso de conocimiento de una verdad, a la que se llega desde una aproximación mitológica*'.

However, the descent is not always to gain knowledge, and as Prof. Holtmark (2001: 26) affirms, there are other reasons why the journey to the Underworld is required: '*the usual purpose of the journey is to obtain spiritual or material wealth –*

³ *Contaminatio* is the literary technique in which authors include plots from different works of other authors. It is particularly noticeable in Plautus and Terence's comedies. 'Fenómeno por el cual dos o más elementos lingüísticos (palabras, formas, construcciones) se combinan entre sí, dando origen a otro elemento'. (*Diccionario de términos filológicos*, Lázaro Carreter, s.v.).

wisdom, gold, flock, or some other form of treasure– or to rescue a friend or friends, often a woman or wife’.

In summary, the purpose of the *katabasis* is the achievement of wealth: a spiritual wealth through a conversation with a relative or a mystagogue (a wise man), a material wealth (an object needed in the world of the living) or to rescue a friend or a loved person (usually a woman) who is captive in the land of the dead because they died or were dragged there by an enemy. An alternative version of Hell presents it as a labyrinth, closely related to the myth of Theseus. This idea, as González Serrano states, follows the opinion of many specialists, and more concretely, Kristensen, author of the equation ‘*Labyrinth = Unterwelt*’ (1999: 8).

‘Kristensen based his interpretation on the fact that the labyrinth, with ‘its twists and dead ends, through which nobody can find a way out’, can only represent the realm of the dead’, as Károly Kerényi states (Vighi and Ponzi 2014: 109). Consequently, the idea of the labyrinth and the Underworld seems to have been established *a posteriori*, as a result of the *contaminatio*.



Image 1: Reference to Aeneas’ *katabasis* in the National Museum of Roman Art (Mérida, Extremadura)

In Ancient literature and mythology, the main characters of the epic poems were Gods and heroes. They were the ones to descend to the Underworld and the *katabasis* usually appears in these types of mythological tales: they had to show the grandeur expected due to their lineage, since they had been chosen for that great deed and everyone trusted and depended on their victory.

The most important epic poems from Ancient literature in which *katabasis* is present are Homer’s *Odyssey XI* and Virgil’s *Aeneid VI*. These are the literary works chosen for this study, although the same theme also appears in other myths as Orpheus and Eurydice, Theseus, Heracles, etc.

The *katabasis* in these works is always a specific episode. It is present in only one canto (in the case of the *Odyssey, XI*) or book (in the *Aeneid, VI*). Consequently, it never becomes the main action of the plot, but rather a necessary stop in the hero’s journey. As we will see, in cinema, *katabasis* is present in the same way: it can appear at the beginning of the movie or at the end, in the climax of the action (for example, when the main character surrenders or loses the spirit to keep on fighting) but *katabasis* does not usually become the main plot in these cases.

In Odysseus' *katabasis* (Od. XI), Circe advises him to descend to the Underworld and talk to the old Tiresias about his return to Ithaca. During his journey through Hell, he encounters Elpenor, a dead friend who asks him to bury him in Eea, Achilles, Sisyphus, his mother (who was alive when he left Ithaca), and finally Tiresias, the blind seer, who tells him about his future and death (Od. XI, 100):

*νόστον δίζηαι μελιηδέα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ:
τὸν δέ τοι ἀργαλέον θήσει θεός:⁴*

In Od. XI 155-159 we have the description of Hell. The world of the living and the world of the dead were separated by the Acheron River, also known as Styx, which had to be crossed to arrive at the Underworld in a boat with Charon.

*τέκνον ἐμόν, πῶς ἦλθες ὑπὸ ζόφον ἠερόεντα
ζωὸς ἐόν; χαλεπὸν δὲ τάδε ζωοῖσιν ὀρᾶσθαι.
μέσσω γὰρ μεγάλοι ποταμοὶ καὶ δεινὰ ῥέεθρα,
Ὠκεανὸς μὲν πρῶτα, τὸν οὖ πῶς ἔστι περῆσαι
πεζῶν ἐόντ', ἦν μὴ τις ἔχη ἐνεργέα νῆα⁵*

While in Odysseus's *katabasis* the hero is alone, Aeneas descends to the Underworld with a guide, the Sybil, who warns him of the dangerousness of his deed (Verg. Aen. VI, 126-129):

*facilis descensus Averno;
noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;
sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,
hoc opus, hic labor est⁶.*

Aeneas enters Hell through a cave. *Katabasis*, then, implies a change of place, to somewhere whose entryway is a gate (or in this case, a cave). He crosses the Acheron

⁴ "Thou askest of thy honey-sweet return, glorious Odysseus, / but this shall a god make grievous unto thee". The Greek text of the *Odyssey* and the English translation quoted throughout this study belong to the following edition: Homer. *The Odyssey with an English Translation* by A.T. Murray, PH.D. in two volumes. Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1919. This work is listed in the Bibliography.

⁵ "My child, how didst thou come beneath the murky darkness, being still alive? Hard is it for those that live to behold these realms, for between are great rivers and dread streams; Oceanus first, which one may in no wise cross on foot, but only if one have a well-built ship".

⁶ "The downward path to death is easy; all the livelong night and day dark Pluto's door stands open for a guest. But O! remounting to the world of light, this is a task indeed, a strife supreme".

River with Charon, where he encounters his dead father and a dead friend, Misenus, who has not been buried, Dido, etc. among others.

The boat is surrounded by other boats with dead people, but they do not talk or attack since they are only ghosts and souls. The ferryman Charon is depicted as an old man with long beard as in the *Odyssey*.

The purpose of Aeneas's descent is to find his father Anchises so that he can tell him about his future (Verg. *Aen.* VI, 756-761):

*Nunc age, Dardanium prolem quae deinde sequatur
gloria, qui maneant Itala de gente nepotes,
inlustris animas nostrumque in nomen ituras,
expediam dictis, et te tua fata docebo*⁷.

His father tells him about his children, the new cities, the foundation of Rome, Caesar's birth, etc. As Odysseus, he cannot hug him (Verg. *Aen.* VI, 700-702):

*Ter conatus ibi collo dare brachia circum,
ter frustra compressa manus effugit imago,
par levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno*⁸.

All in all, the *katabasis* presented in these works is a journey of the hero to Hell where the hero finds either wisdom or wealth. The overall pattern of the *katabasis*, is, consequently, the following: the descent is suggested to the hero, as Circe with Odysseus but the hero decides to go; in Hell, the hero learns about his future or is encouraged to face his destiny usually by a close relative or friend; the descent implies a change of place and the entryway can be either a gate or the sea usually at a given moment of the day, at sunset or at night; there is a change in hero after his experience in the Underworld and finally, after the hero gains the knowledge that was expected, he



Image 2: Alexander Dmitrievich Litovchenko (1835-1890), *Charon carries souls across the river Styx*.

Source: Wikipedia

⁷ "Hark now! for of the glories I will tell / That wait our old Italian breed, / Who shall be mighty spirits, and prolong / Our names, their heritage. I will unfold" The story, and reveal the destined years".)

⁸ "Thrice would his arms in vain that shape enfold. / Thrice from the touch of hand the vision fled, / Like wafted winds or likest hovering dreams".

returns to the world of the living.

As a result, the theme of the *katabasis* can appear in different ways depending on the director's purpose: sometimes it is a journey of self-discovery; it allows the hero to rescue a loved one, etc. The variety of *katabatic* topics allows different adaptations and reinterpretations.

3 Katabasis in fantasy films

As Holtsmark states at the beginning of his work (2001: 25), '*katabasis films tend to fall into certain genres*'. Some of those genres in which *katabasis* is more likely to be found are science-fiction, war stories, westerns, thrillers and fantasy films.

The films we are dealing with in this study are movies that belong not only to the genre, but also to other genres, since it is impossible, and inaccurate, to define a movie by classifying it in a single genre.

Fantasy films are those movies which include themes and characters related to magic, supernatural creatures, mythology... in brief, elements that do not exist in our world and that have nothing to do with science and cannot be explained by it.

In both of the films we are going to discuss, we see that the main character is the hero who has the responsibility to protect and save everybody from the enemy, so we can also say that they also belong to the adventure film genre. Besides, these movies are usually intended for a young audience due to the elements that appear and the nature of the plot; and the end is happy in most of the cases. The deaths of the characters are not presented in a shocking and unpleasant way as in other genres, like science-fiction or horror films, but rather as a 'transfer' to a new place.

3.1 Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End (2007)

To begin this analysis of films, I have chosen a fantasy movie, *Pirates of the Caribbean: at World's End* (2007, IMDB <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0449088/>)- the third movie of the pentalogy *Pirates of the Caribbean-*, directed by Gore Verbinski (Oak Ridge, Tennessee, U.S.A., 1964) and produced by Walt Disney Pictures. The movies are based on the homonym ride attraction in Disney World, Orlando (USA), opened in 1967.

Just by looking at its title we can infer that the idea of the *katabasis* and descent to the Underworld will be present. The title does not refer to the ‘World’s end’ as the destruction of the world but to its geographic limit, taking into account the archaic belief that Earth was flat. It is at the physical end of the world where the ‘other’ world, the Underworld or world of the dead, begins. The entryway to the Underworld is found at *finis terrae*.

The reason why I have chosen this film as the first one to analyze is that this is the film of the essay in which the Classical theme of the *katabasis* (κατάβασις) is more easily recognizable, visually speaking, and it appears in the early part of the film: the elements, the descriptions of the inferno, presented as a kind of purgatory, even the character’s words are almost the same as in the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey*. I believe it is the right point of departure for our journey through cinema and Classical Tradition because it shows with accuracy the idea of *katabasis*, which in other films of different genre is found in a more subtle way, and however, still, recognizable.

At the end of the second movie, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead’s Man Chest* (Gore Verbinski, 2006), the pirate Jack Sparrow is swallowed by the legendary giant sea monster and dies. In the following movie, the East India Trading Company controls the Flying Dutchman (the faster boat in the world, which belongs to Davy Jones), the company is strengthening and they are a threat to pirates. In order to prepare their defense, the pirates need to convene the Brethren Court, that is, a pirate council to plan how they will fight against them. To do so, they need to gather all the members of the council, and Sparrow is one of them. He died without having named his substitute in the brotherhood, so William Turner, Elizabeth Swann, Barbossa and Sparrow's crew need to go to the Underworld to bring him back.

Besides, Will Turner’s father is captive as part of the crew in the Flying Dutchman (Davy Jones’s boat) due to a curse and the only way to set him free is to give Davy Jones the Black Pearl back, which is in the Underworld with Sparrow. His father is a prisoner between the two worlds: the world of the living and the world of the dead.

The first thing that we must do is to identify who will assume the role of hero in the movie. The hero is William Turner; he is the one to rescue Sparrow and save his father from the curse. Of course, Sparrow cannot be the hero, but rather, the anti-hero: he does not fit in the archetype of hero: bravery, loyalty, honesty, etc. He is just the opposite: the perfect pirate (a liar, a cheater and a drunkard). Sparrow takes on the role of a comic, passive character whose only purpose is to steal, run away and never get

caught. His comic adventures are what make us laugh and what keep us interested in the film.

On the other hand, Turner fits in the ideal hero characteristics: a young, brave man in love with a beautiful woman with the mission of rescuing a relative and a friend. He accepts his fate right from the beginning and is accompanied by friends in his descent to the Underworld.

The entryway to Hell, as Holtsmark (2001: 25) describes it, is *'often conceived as lying caves or grottos or other openings in the earth's crust into the nether regions, such as chasms of clefts'*, and the journey *'usually takes place at dusk or during the night'*. In the film, the main characters have a little help: the navigation charts which give them clues about the right moment and place to enter the Underworld. The entryway, as the navigation charts state is *'over the edge and over again'* and the right moment is when *'sunrise sets flash of green'*.



Image 3: Source: *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Gore Verbinski, 2007.

The pirate Barbossa, who acts as a kind of Charon in the sense that he guides them through the river, repeats almost the exact words of the *Aeneid* when Sybil warns Aeneas of the dangerousness that the journey implies (Verg. Aen. VI, 126-129, *cit. supra*):

*facilis descensus Averno:
noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;
sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,
hoc opus, hic labor est.
The downward path to death is easy; all the livelong night and day Dark Pluto's door
stands open for a guest. But O! remounting to the world of light, this is a task indeed, a
strife supreme,*

whereas Barbossa's words are (Gore Verbinski, 2006; min. 24.24): *'It's not getting to the land of the dead the problem, it's getting back'*.

Through the rivers that they cross to find Sparrow, they see their dead relatives. As Odysseus, Elizabeth sees her dead father (in the case of Odysseus, he sees his dead mother), who was alive when they started the descent; the souls of the dead surround

the boat but they do not talk or attack, they are just ghosts. It is also the same picture as in the *Aeneid* (Verg. Aen. VI, 700-702, *cit. supra*):

*Ter conatus ibi collo dare brachia circum,
ter frustra comprehensa manus effugit imago,
par levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno.*

When Elizabeth sees his father in a small boat in the river and tries to talk to him, he does not recognize her at first sight: he is forgetting his life as if he were sailing the river Lethe (the river of forgetfulness). Quite the same as in Od. XI, 100 *cit. supra*:

*νόστον δίζηαι μελιηδέα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ:
τόν δέ τοι ἀργαλέον θήσει θεός:*

Elizabeth sees his dead father in the river (Gore Verbinski, 2006; min. 48.04):

- 'Elizabeth, are you dead?'
- 'No.'
- 'I think I am'.



Will Turner is informed of past things: he finds out that his love Elizabeth kissed Sparrow before he died; and as both Odysseus and Aeneas, Will Turner is told about his future: Tiresias and Anchises are the ones who reveal the future to the heroes in the Classical myths and the goddess Calypso is in the movie the one who tells Turner his destiny: he will become the new captain of the Flying Dutchman and Davy Jones's substitute.

The hero now knows his future and starts to understand it and accept it: it is a complete change on Turner. After the hero rescues Sparrow and the Black Pearl, it is time to go back to the world of the living. The ascent is not easy: the navigation charts say 'up is down'. At sunrise, they must turn over the boat so they can return from the Underworld.

As a conclusion, we can clearly see how the pattern of the *katabasis* is repeated almost in the same way as in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Odyssey*. The journey of the hero Will Turner brings him wisdom and knowledge about his destiny and we find those same elements as in the original myths.

As we already know, the purpose of the descent to Hell is obtaining wealth, material or spiritual. In this case, we find all: Turner is informed of his future by the goddess Calypso (spiritual wealth), and recovers the boat, the Black Pearl, that he needs to release his father (material wealth) but also rescues his friend Jack from the dead. After the journey, the '(re)Turner' hero goes back to the upper world and lives out his destiny as he learned in the Underworld.

The kind of *mimesis* found in this film is an *interpretatio*: clear references to the original myth are constant (the same words as in the *Aeneid*), the entryway through a cliff in the sea, the idea of the boat and the souls around who do not remember their life, the rescue of a friend who died and the knowledge that the Hero gains after the journey, which brings him determination and courage to face his destiny. This film includes the journey in two of the levels of interpretation: the rescue from Hades and the hero's purification.

3.2 Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (2009)

The second of the fantasy films that are going to be analyzed in this essay is *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009), the sixth of the eight movies of the *Harry Potter* saga and the adaptation of the novel of the same name by J. K. Rowling. The film was directed by David Yates (1963, Merseyside, England).

Elements from the Classical tradition play an important role in Harry Potter's books and films. Some examples the *nomen parlans*⁹ which show the characters' personality through their names: Albus Dumbledore ('white' in Latin, symbolism of purity and truth), Minerva (Roman goddess of wisdom) or Severus Snape (reference to his vehemence); as well as the spells in pseudo-Latin. Besides, mythological creatures as the three-headed dog (Cerberus) appear, Fluffy (Hagrid's dog), which keeps the Philosopher's Stone safe in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001).

⁹ 'Se entiende por "nomen parlans" el carácter significativo del nombre de un personaje, pues informa de éste por su misma denominación' (Tovar 2005: 290).

As we see, the author borrows elements in what seems a *contaminatio* of themes, characters, creatures, language structures from the classical culture. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (David Yates, 2009), Harry's *katabasis*¹⁰ takes place when he goes to a dangerous cave with Dumbledore to find one of the *horcruxes*. To defeat the enemy, Voldemort, Harry has to find and destroy all the *horcruxes* (objects which contain a part of Voldemort's soul).

In short, we are about to analyze how '*Harry Potter visits the Underworld, as all heroes must. He endures losses and sorrows that usher him into the depths geographically and intraphysically as the travels within in and under Hogwarts*' (Hippard 2008: 85).

Dumbledore informs Harry of the mission: they must find and destroy a *horcrux* hidden in a cave in the middle of nowhere. In fact, we are not told either in the book or the film where the cave is; they simply *apparate*¹¹ there.

The hero's journey to this cave (which is the Underworld) occurs at night, following the pattern of the *katabasis* explained by Holtsmark (2001: 25, *cit. supra*): '*at dusk or during the night*' and the hero goes there accompanied by Professor Dumbledore (the mentor or mystagogue, who guides and helps him



throughout his descent). He warns Harry of the risk that the mission carries, as the Sybil did with Aeneas in Verg. Aen. VI, 126-129. Dumbledore words are '*the place is extremely dangerous*' (David Yates, 2009; min. 118). Besides, Dumbledore orders Harry to leave him behind if things get worse: '*should I tell you to abandon me and save yourself, you must do so*' (ibid.; min. 118). The idea of a friend lost in the *katabasis* also appears as part of the pattern: '*[they] may be lost in the course of the journey so that the protagonist returns alone*' (2001: 26); although Dumbledore does not die in the cave, but back in Hogwarts.

The setting of the Underworld is a cave in an island in the middle of the sea. The entryway is in a cleft on the rocks (the same as Verg. Aen. VI 236-240):

¹⁰ In the book, the *katabasis* takes place in chapter 26, 'The Cave' and it is presented in the same way.

¹¹ This word means to transport oneself from one place to another in Harry Potter's world.

*Spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu,
scrupea, tuta lacu nigro nemorumque tenebris*¹²,

To access the cavern, they have to make a sacrifice with their blood. This element appears also in the *Odyssey* (Hom. Od. XI 96: ‘αἵματος ὄφρα πίω καί τοι νημερτέα εἶπω’, ‘*that I may drink of the blood and tell thee sooth*’). Blood is part of the rite.

The cavern is in complete darkness, and they must cross a lake in a small boat, just as Charon does in the river Styx. The lake is full of souls and ghosts trapped there, as it is depicted in *Aeneid* VI 325-328:

*Haec omnis, quam cernis, inops inhumataque turba est;
portitor ille Charon; hi, quos vehit unda, sepulti.
Nec ripas datur horrendas et rauca fluenta
transportare prius quam sedibus ossa quierunt*¹³.

As a matter of fact, Dumbledore acts as Charon and as Tiresias in the sense that he provides Harry with the knowledge that he needs to face his destiny and accomplish his duty: to kill Voldemort.

Dumbledore’s physical appearance irremediably reminds us of the mystagogue: the old wise man with long beard that teaches and helps Harry not only in this film but throughout the saga. In order to recover the *horcrux* which is in a fountain in the middle of the lake, Dumbledore offers himself to drink the poisonous water so they can reach it. This lets him on the verge of death. After retrieving the object, they *apparate* back in Hogwarts, where he destroys the *horcrux*.

Katabasis is a recurrent theme in *Harry Potter*: we can also find it in other films too. Hell as the Chamber of Secrets (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Chris Columbus, 2002); Hell as Harry’s ‘vision’ after suffering the mortal spell *avada kedavra* (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2*, David Yates, 2011), when he meets his dead friend Dumbledore who tells him about the future, although in this case, the journey is not physical but spiritual (a dream or a hallucination). When he returns from the other world, he has gained the courage to finally face Voldemort:

¹² "A cave profound, of entrance gaping wide, / O'erhung with rock, in gloom of sheltering grove, / Near the dark waters of a lake"

¹³ "Here far and wide / Thou seest the hapless throng that hath no grave. / That boatman Charon bears across the deep / Such as be sepulchred with holy care".

'The encounters take place in the underground Chamber of Secrets, the Shrieking Shack, the graveyard, the Department of Mysteries under the Ministry of Magic, in an isolated cave seaside and, in the last book, in the Forbidden Forest itself. The theme of the hero's descent can be traced back to the Classical motif of the hero's journey to the Land of the Dead' (Saxena 2012: 117).

In consequence, the *mimesis* found in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* is an *interpretatio*: it is a clear representation of Hell as in the Classical myths, including the same elements: entry through a cleft, the boat, the lake, the figure of the mystagogue, etc.; and his *katabasis* has a double purpose: material (the *horcrux*) and spiritual wealth (knowledge).

4 *Katabasis* in thriller films

The thriller genre includes films in which suspense and tension play the most important roles. This genre usually has as the main characters police agents or detectives, with the task of solving a case or a mission. The main characteristic of the films belonging to this genre is the feeling of uncertainty, which catches the audience until the end, when the mystery is solved.

In this genre we will see how *katabasis* is presented in a different way, since thriller films do not usually include clear elements (visually speaking) from the Ancient mythology. However, it is the director's and scriptwriters' duty to adapt and reinterpret these elements, and it is our aim to recognize them.

4.1 The Silence of the Lambs (1991)

The Silence of the Lambs (1991), directed by Jonathan Demme (Baldwin, New York, 1944) and awarded with five Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Writing (Adapted Screenplay) is an adaptation from the novel of the same name by Thomas Harris (1988).

Clarice Starling, a young woman who is preparing to become a FBI agent, is given a task: the serial killer only known as 'Buffalo Bill' is out there and the FBI needs Hannibal Lecter's help to catch him, so she must go to the asylum where he has been taken since he is the only who understands completely a mentally disturbed person. Dr Hannibal Lecter is a psychiatrist but a cannibalistic serial killer as well.

From the very beginning, the impression that we get of Clarice Starling is that of a young, weak woman who fights for the policemen's respect. Even though she is one of the best students in the academy (there are several references to her impressive marks, she was graduated magna), her superiors do not take her seriously because she seems weak and is a woman.

As we can see, this is a considerable change in the pattern of *katabasis*: the hero is not a man, but a woman. Clarice Starling will be the heroine of this movie with the duty to descend to the Underworld to seek useful information to arrest Buffalo Bill.



Image 6: The entryway to the Underworld. Source: *The Silence of the Lambs*, Jonathan Demme, 1991.

She suffers different *katabaseis* throughout the film, although the setting of Hell is always the same: the asylum. The psychiatric hospital is then, the Underworld. It is not the world of the dead, but the world of the disturbed men, who have brutally killed, mad men who have been locked for years in a small cell. That place is hell on earth.

Even though the psychopaths are behind bars, the place is dangerous: they are unpredictable and the guards warn Clarice not to get close to the bars. In the case of Lecter, the security is higher: there is an unbreakable glass that isolates him from the rest.

The same as Odysseus and Circe, Clarice is encouraged to the *katabasis* by her superior, agent Crawford, the responsible for the investigation on Buffalo Bill. He describes it as an '*interesting errand*' (Jonathan Demme, 1991; min. 05.44).

Once she has arrived in the asylum, the Charon-like figure who leads her to the 'gate' of the Hell is Dr Chilton, the director of the facility. However, Clarice is alone in her descent to the world of the disturbed: she does not want him there with her. Dr Chilton does not take her seriously either: first, he tries to flirt with her (with no result) and after that, he jokes about the idea that Lecter would only talk to her because he has not seen a woman in eight years. Lecter would be more receptive and willing to talk with a pretty young woman with an innocent look. Dr Chilton is a disgusting and abusive director, who treats the inmates badly, especially Lecter, since he knows that he is smarter than him.

The journey to the entryway is visually revealing. First, we have an overhead shot of them going downstairs; then, we see a dark hall leading to several locked doors with

bars and finally, the last door: the last set of steps¹⁴, low light and a red¹⁵ door with bars [see image 6 *supra*].

Beyond the threshold, she arrives at the long corridor with all the inmates' cells: her journey includes the rude comments and attitudes of the rest of the animals locked there with Lecter. At the end of the corridor she sees Lecter's cell¹⁶ as if it were the throne of the king in that world of disgust, violence, and of course, death: there no souls of the loved relatives as in the *Aeneid* or the *Odyssey*; she is directly facing the killers of innocent people.

She tells him the reason of her visit: to seek information about Buffalo Bill. However, her *katabasis* is not a single visit at the asylum: she visits him several times, which can be considered as a whole *katabasis* with a final aim, to find and catch Buffalo Bill and save the girl that he has kidnapped. Nevertheless, Lecter knows that she wants something else:

'- No. But I'll give you a chance for what you love most.
- And what is that?
- Advancement.'

Her *katabasis* is caused by the Buffalo Bill case, and still, it will also bring her spiritual development, what Lecter defines as 'advancement' (let's remember that he is a psychiatrist), that is, promotion in the FBI but also self-discovery and the strength to face the world and become a strong woman. She is looking for the silence of the lambs, in other words, inner peace.

The guide, help, advice that Lecter provides her with, finally allows her to solve the case and kill Buffalo Bill. Even though Lecter's words are confusing and sometimes non-sensical, she manages to discover the truth:

'- Everything you need to find him is in those pages.
- Then tell me how.
- First principles, Clarice. Simplicity. Read Marcus Aurelius.'

¹⁴ Staircases or elevators can be *katabatic* elements in cinema since they serve as the entry to the Underworld. For example, for Hitchcock, 'stairs take his characters and his audience to the fears, dangers and rewards of self-discovery' (Yacowar 2010: 206).

¹⁵ Red color is a symbolism of blood and the color of Hell.

¹⁶ In Lecter's cell we see a drawing of the Duomo in Florence (Italy), the city where Dante Alighieri, author of *The Divine Comedy* (whose setting is the *Inferno*, or Hell), was born and lived until his exile.

Her *anabasis* is complete when she saves the young girl, and her visits to the world of Lecter suppose a change on her. She matures, gains self-confidence, receives the recognition for her effort, graduates in the FBI academy and leaves that secondary role imposed by her superiors to become the heroine and true saver of the girl.

The symbolism of the butterfly (present in the movie's poster) reveals the quest of transformation. Buffalo Bill was transsexual and wanted to be a woman and this symbolism can also be applied to



Image 8: The purpose of the hero's *katabasis* is to rescue his lover and her nephew. Source: *Blood Work*, Clint Eastwood, 2002.

Clarice: she also suffers a transformation in which she obtains spiritual wealth through her *katabasis*.

In this case, what we find is an *imitatio* of the Classical theme of the *katabasis*, because some *katabatic* elements are present: the asylum as the Underworld (the world of the mad men), symbolisms of the dangerousness of her journey through colors and light, the heroine's inner change, etc.; although the pattern has been modified considerably: her *katabasis* does not occur at a certain moment, but she experiences several visits to the asylum, which constitute a single *katabasis*.

4.2 Blood work (2002)

Produced, directed and starring Clint Eastwood (San Francisco, USA, 1930), *Blood Work* is a 2002 thriller film in which a retired FBI agent is involved in a series of assassinations which turn out to be connected. The film is partially based on the novel of the same name by Michael Connelly (1998).

Terry McCaleb, a former FBI agent retired due to his heart problems, lives peacefully in his boat. He retired after having a heart attack while he was trying to arrest a serial killer obsessed with him. After two years away from the FBI, he is visited by the sister and son of a woman, Gloria, who was killed, and whose heart was transplanted to him. He accepts to help them because he feels that he has to repay her for the heart he has received.

In the final part of the movie, after the serial killer is revealed, he kidnaps and hides both Graciella (Gloria's sister, who becomes eventually Terry's lover) and her nephew. When Terry finds out who the killer is, he forces him to go to the place where he has locked them up.

The hero's *katabasis* leads him to the Underworld, which is represented in the film as an abandoned boat about to be dismantled. The journey takes place at night, and they go by Terry's boat. During the trip there, the killer describes the place as (Clint Eastwood, 2002; min. 1.45.50):

'Now it's the perfect prison, better than Alcatraz, my shop of horrors... [He laughs]', as if he were the king of that boat which represents Hell.

The hero descends to the Underworld to rescue his lover and her nephew, and he goes there accompanied inevitably by the man who took them there, Buddy, the killer. The boat is a dangerous place, the same as Hell is always presented; that's why Terry goes there armed.

They get on the ship and the descent is carried out through a set of steps. The scene depicts a dark descent, in which the only light that we perceive is red¹⁷. Here the steps also serve as the entry to the Underworld, as we have discussed previously in the study: they symbolize a physical descent which leads to the hero's accomplishment of his duty.

The people that he needs to rescue are hidden in the deepest part of the Underworld, that is, in a small room in the lowest part of the boat. He finally rescues them.

According to Holtsmark (2001: 26, *cit. supra*), the hero's companion may be lost in the descent. However and even though his companion, Buddy, is not his buddy at all but the responsible for the murders and the one who took them, he is lost in the boat,



Image 9: Terry, the hero, rescues his lover from the Underworld.

since Terry and Graciella manage to kill him after a shooting. As we see, the descent serves not only to rescue the loved ones but also to face and defeat his enemy.

¹⁷ As we saw in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), the red color symbolizes Hell.

Consequently, we see that *katabasis* in this film occurs at a certain point of the plot, more concretely, at the climax of the movie, when the killer is about to murder the people that the hero loves most. After the hero manages to rescue them, as Orpheus tried in the myth, he is able to kill Buddy and go back home safe. *Katabasis* does not bring the hero spiritual knowledge, since he is already a hero (a successful retired FBI agent). However, it gives him what he did not have, a family.

Some *katabatic* elements are present in this movie: the journey to a hellish place (a cemetery of ships), depicted in scenes with low light, the rescue of a loved person and the final *anabasis* in which the hero saves them and they go back home. In short, we can say that the type of *mimesis* in *Blood Work* is an *imitatio*.

5 *Katabasis* in science-fiction films

The last film genre that we are going to discuss in this essay on *katabasis* is science-fiction. This type of films is characterized by being ‘*stories based around advanced technology, robotics, space exploration and time travels*’ (Johnston 2011: 7), along with extraterrestrial life, and elements that science cannot explain or accept.

5.1 Blade Runner (1982)

We start the last stop in the journey through cinema with a classic in science-fiction films, *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (South Shields, England, 1937) in 1982, a director best known for his science-fiction movies.

Blade Runner was his second success, after the boom of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), both considered cult films. It is partially based on the science-fiction short novel by Phillip K. Dick *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). The movie presents the dystopian futurist city of Los Angeles in which a retired police officer, Rick Deckard, is given the mission: to seek and ‘retire’ (kill) four replicants (androids that look exactly like people) who have escaped and are killing people. After a nuclear war, Earth was deeply contaminated and only the poorest people still live there and cannot run away to another planet.

In his pursuit he falls in love with a replicant, although he doubts about whether she is reliable or not. He suffers an internal journey in which he realizes that replicants

have feelings, the same as humans, a journey which ends up in Hell, where after a conversation with Roy, a Nexus-6 android, the most powerful and perfect replicant ever created, he understands their feelings: fear, love, sadness.



Image 3: The hero enters the Underworld armed since it is a dangerous place. Source: *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, 1982.

Replicants only live for four years, so Roy and another three replicants want to find their creator in order to prolong their life expectancy. To get to Dr Tyrell, they find J. F. Sebastian (Isidore in the novel), a man who works for the company which creates the replicants.

Roy finally convinces J. F. Sebastian to go to Dr Tyrell's house, when he is told that there is no possible solution, he kills both. Meanwhile, Rick Deckard is chasing them and finally finds out where they hide. They have found shelter in J. F. Sebastian's apartment.

Here is when Rick's *katabasis* begins. His journey is by car since J. F. Sebastian lives in a remote part of the city. Even the 'descent' is already dangerous: he is attacked in his way here. The entry to Hell is at night and with low-light scenes (a recurrent atmosphere in *katabatic* journeys as we have already seen).

J. F. Sebastian's building is abandoned: he was the only one left living there. The entryway to his apartment, which is the Underworld, is through an elevator. Consequently, we do not have a descent but rather an ascent. His house is a place of death: there Rick finds dead beings, not human, but robots. He worked making robots and lived surrounded by broken androids. It is the Hell of the androids, the place where the outcasts go to die; a cemetery of broken toys, just as Sebastian was. He had a weird medical condition which made him age too fast, very similar to what happens to the replicants, which have a short life expectancy.

Rick, determined to accomplish his task, enters the apartment and finds Roy and Zhora. As we see, the pattern here is not to rescue a friend but rather to kill them, so we find what we can call an impure *katabasis* since it does not fit the pattern of *katabasis* and it is not completed at the end¹⁸.

¹⁸ In the novel on which the movie is based, Rick kills Roy.

What started as a mission to retire the replicants turned into a spiritual journey. After the conversation with Roy, he learnt that replicants have developed true feelings as real as human beings' feelings. Not only are they interacting robots that follow orders, but also they have dreams and expectations in life.



Image 4: The conversation with the replicant Roy brings him knowledge.

The inner change in the hero is noticeable when he goes back home and finds Rachel, the replicant, waiting for him. His doubts about her disappear and they decide to leave together¹⁹, even though his superior (who acts like Circe in the *Odyssey*, inducing him to the mission) warned him that: ‘*She cannot live. But who can?*’ (Ridley Scott, 1982; min. 1.44.24); meaning that as Earth is rotten; there is no way out neither for humans nor replicants. That is why he let them run away and does not arrest her. When Rick arrives home, he finds a paper unicorn (his superior always makes them). The *anagnorisis* (another recurrent element in cinema, also borrowed from Classical literature, that is, the recognition of an object or a person) shows his boss' agreement.

As a result, the hero's journey to Hell in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) brings him spiritual wealth: the knowledge that replicants have feelings too and the determination to run away with a replicant.

Rick does not accomplish his duty, although the replicants die because their life expectancy reaches its limit. This shows the idea of the impure *katabasis*. The theme of the *katabasis* appears, but in a more subtle way than in other films because the *katabatic* elements are adapted.

In summary, the kind of *mimesis* that we find in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) is an *aemulatio*. The idea of the journey to the Underworld to gain knowledge is present, but as we have seen, many of the *katabatic* elements have been adapted (the elevator as the ascent, the ‘enemy’ as the source of knowledge, the journey to kill an enemy and not to rescue him, the death of the replicants, etc.) as well as the fact that Rick does not accomplish his duty, but the *katabasis* makes him change. That is why we consider it as an impure *katabasis*.

¹⁹ In the novel, Rick goes back home with his wife (he is not married in the movie) and does not leave with Rachel.

5.2 Star Wars IV: A New Hope (1977)

The *Star Wars* universe has been widely analyzed and studied in terms of its connection to the journey of the hero. Experts agree that: ‘*Lucas modeled his story around the characters and situations that are archetypal to mythology*’ (Hogan 2012: 113), and George Lucas has admitted publically that Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* made a great influence on the writing of the saga, especially the idea of the monomyth (explained in the Introduction to this essay) and the journey of the hero: ‘*The Star Wars series’ connections to mythology have never been a secret. From the time of the first film’s release, critics commented on the film’s borrowings of mythic structure*’ (ibid.).

The film that we are going to discuss is the earliest film of the saga, *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977), although it is the fourth film from a chronological point of view in the saga. It was written and directed by George Lucas (1944, California, USA) and it has become one of the most famous sagas in the history of cinema.

The hero’s *katabasis* in *Star Wars IV* occurs during the rescue of Princess Leia. Luke, a young boy who lives is a far away planet, buys some androids for his uncle and one them replays a recorded message from the Princes asking for Obi-Wan’s help. Luke finds Obi-Wan, a now retired Jedi whose name is Ben Kenobi, who tells him about the current situation of the Republic and the urgency in rescuing Princess Leia since she is the only one able to face the commanding officer and Darth Vader.

As Circe with Odysseus, Obi-Wan incites Luke to join the rebellion and to go with him in the risky mission of the rescue. At the moment when Luke accepts his duty, the journey of the hero begins.

The setting of Hell in this film is the Death Star, an immense space station where Leia is captive. Even its name gives us an idea of its dangerousness: the headquarters of the Empire, the place



Image 12: Obi-Wan is Luke’s mystagogue. Source: *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*, George Lucas, 1977.

where the power of the Empire lays. As Deyneka (2012: 43) states, ‘*Luke’s journey to the new Death Star is another descent into the Underworld, with the Emperor as a*

monster in the middle of the labyrinth'. Here we find the idea of the labyrinth that we discussed as well in the introduction of this essay: the Death Star is a labyrinth, full of corridors and tunnels, where Princess Leia is waiting to be rescued. This idea seems to be a *contaminatio* created afterwards and not a part of the original *katabasis* in the Classical myths: a complicated place to escape and there where the monster hides.

Following Campbell's monomyth, Obi-Wan represents the figure of the 'Mentor', the same as Tiresias in the *Odyssey*, the old wise man who tells the hero about his past (the death of his father), his future and destiny: to become a Jedi, join the rebellion and defeat Darth Vader and the Empire. The mystagogue Kenobi dies in the Death Star, killed by Darth Vader, the god of Hades. Sometimes this *katabatic* element appears. As Holtsmark states, the companion '*may be lost in the course of the journey so that the protagonist returns alone*' (2001: 26, *cit. supra*).

Obi-Wan teaches Luke what the Force is, what a Jedi represents, how to use the lightsaber and how to control the Force inside him. He accompanies him in his *katabasis*. But before that, they need a spaceship and a crew: Han Solo and Chewbacca (with their spaceship, the Millennium Falcon) and the androids (C3PO and R2D2) will complete the team.

As a Charon-like figure, Han Solo pilots the spaceship 'boat' to the core of the Death Star. As a compensation for the dangerousness of the mission, Obi-Wan offers him a very large sum of money. The entryway to Hell is easy: they are caught in the powerful gravitational center of the Death Star and they are dragged there. The main problem is to go back, as the Sybil warned Aeneas, because they need to disconnect the gravitational center in order to be able to escape.

Luke separates from his guide, Obi-Wan, and has to face danger by himself. In this case, Kenobi leaves to deactivate the gravitational center so they can go back home.

Finally, Luke, the young hero, finds Leia (which is similar to Campbell's 'The meeting with the goddess') and rescues her. Here we see a *katabasis* to rescue a friend (even though he did not meet her before, we will see in the following films that they have a lot in common). They return home and sound.

As a result, Luke's *katabasis* brings him, on the one hand spiritual wealth: it is a journey of self-discovery. He realizes that he is a Jedi and learns from Obi-Wan, who acts as the mentor, the mystagogue, about his past and dead father. He finds the strength and courage to join the rebellion against the Empire. On the other hand, he rescues Princess Leia from Hell, where she was going to be executed by Darth Vader. Consequently, we find a *katabasis* with a double purpose.



Image 5: Luke rescues Leia from the Death Star (the Underworld)

The idea of the hero's *katabasis* is a recurrent element in the *Star Wars* saga, to the extent that other characters also suffer a descent to the Underworld. It is the case of Princess Leia in *Star Wars V: The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), when she infiltrates in the Jabba the Hutt's planet where he keeps Han Solo prisoner and saves him from a certain death.

As a consequence, the idea of the *katabasis* presented in *Star Wars IV* is based on the monomyth by Campbell, and in turn, it was adapted from the Ancient myth of the hero's decent to the Underworld. Even though this *katabasis* is indirectly based on the Ancient original myths, we see how *katabasis* is present in this science-fiction film, readapted and including several elements from different mythologies, the monomyth, as part of the *contaminatio*.

In this case, the type of *mimesis* of the film is *imitatio*, because the theme is presented indirectly, through Campbell's monomyth, and several elements are easily recognizable: the old wise man, the loss of a friend in the journey, the spiritual knowledge gained, the rescue of a friend, the idea of a journey to a dangerous place, the Death Star, etc.

6 Conclusions (English and Spanish)

6.1 English

My aim in this essay was to show the continuity of the Classical theme of the *katabasis*, the descent of the hero to the Underworld, in cinema. In order to reach this

goal, an appropriate method of analysis needed to be developed, taking Aristotelian notion of *mimesis* as the starting point, as well as its different types: *aemulatio*, *imitatio* and *interpretatio*. This method consists of the adaptation of this classification for cinema: *aemulatio* (movies in which the theme is subtly shown), *imitatio* (movies in which *katabatic* elements appear through metaphors or symbols) and the most clear type of *mimesis*, *interpretatio* (movies which include direct references to the Classical myths or the same characters, with an easily recognizable similarity to those in the Classical culture).

As a result, directors and scriptwriters resort to the Classical to borrow elements that can fit in the films, sometimes to enhance the movie, sometimes as a narrative technique, but ultimately, those elements can be recognized and analyzed as it is shown in this essay.

Of course, and as Cano (1999: 102, *cit. supra*) says, *contaminatio* plays an important role: directors modify these elements depending on their purpose. That is why the three types of *mimesis* are found in the analysis; the aim was to show the variety of forms and patterns in which the theme of *katabasis* can be adapted, and not only in terms of the level of similarity (μίμησις) with the original myth, but also its adaptability to different cinema genres and different decades.

Even though cinema has experienced an incredible technological development, mainly in special effects and recording techniques, it is worth proving that the theme is recurrent throughout decades. For this reason, films from different decades have been chosen: the oldest of them is from 1977 (*Star Wars IV: A New Hope*, George Lucas) and the most recent was released only a few years ago, in 2009 (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, David Yates), thirty two years later.

The film genres chosen in this study are fantasy, thriller and science-fiction. The idea was to demonstrate how this theme is reinterpreted in such different genres. The results have been included in the following table:

Genre/ <i>Mimesis</i>	Aemulatio	Imitatio	Interpretatio
Fantasy			Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
Thriller		The Silence of the Lambs Blood Work	
Science-fiction	Blade Runner	Star Wars IV: A New Hope	

The results show that fantasy genre is more likely to include *katabatic* elements belonging to the highest level of *mimesis*. This occurs because this genre promotes the presence of magical creatures and elements, the same elements that are usually found in the Classical myths (e.g. conversations with dead relatives or friends) as we see in *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Gore Verbinski, 2007; the scene with Elizabeth and her dead father in a boat surrounded by other boats carrying souls), or the idea of mystagogue (Dumbledore in Harry Potter's saga).

Thriller films also include *katabasis*, but in a very different way. As it is a genre in which supernatural or magical elements do not usually appear, directors have to adapt and present them differently: through metaphors and symbolisms. Cinema has the perfect techniques to show this visually: with light effects, photography, shootings from different angles (overhead shots) or elements that remind us of the idea of the descend (staircases as in the analyzed films).

This is especially clear in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), when Clarice Starling is led to Lecter's cell, which is placed at the lowest level of the asylum. Her walk there is filmed with scenes in low light and overhead shots, which increases the idea of a descending movement. The same occurs in *Blood Work* (Clint Eastwood, 2002), with the scene of the hero's descent to the lowest part of the boat.

With respect to science-fiction films, *katabatic* elements appear but adapted, as well as in thriller films. In the selection of science-fiction films for this essay, *katabasis* is presented in contrast to the other genres: as an impure *katabasis* in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), in the sense that the hero does not complete his mission but gains spiritual knowledge and finds love. On the other hand, *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) presents *katabasis* as it was described in Joseph Campbell's monomyth. As a consequence, the theme is not taken directly from the Ancient myths but rather through Campbell's influence on George Lucas. In any case, the monomyth is based on the study of different mythologies, including Greco-Roman myths.

What we see in these science-fiction films is that the level of *mimesis* seems to oscillate between *aemulatio* and *imitatio*. This occurs because, the same as in thriller films, the elements have been adapted and not included exactly as in the Ancient myths.

In short, the main conclusion drawn is that fantasy films are more likely to show the *katabatic* theme from a more faithful point of view since this film genre is characterized precisely because the plots focus on mythology and magical worlds.

However, and as it was previously stated, *katabasis* allows adaptations to more realistic genre, such as thrillers or any other film genre.

Another relevant point is the way in which the heroes are portrayed. We do not find in any of the six cases a hero who fits completely in the figure of the Ancient hero (Aeneas, Odysseus, Orpheus, etc.). What we see is that each hero reflects characteristics of the Ancient heroes. This has to do with the *contaminatio*: the technique of mixing characters and features from different myths and works.

The heroes of the films chosen in this essay do not fit the stereotype of hero. For example, Harry Potter is a very young hero, Terry McCaleb is a retired FBI agent, Clarice Starling is not a hero but a heroine... The most similar hero in the movies to the stereotype of mythic hero is Will Turner, who happens to appear in the most faithful adaptation of the theme, *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Gore Verbinski, 2007), an *interpretatio*.

In conclusion, the presence of *katabasis* in cinema as well as the adaptation of the *katabatic* elements from the Classical myths (especially the descents of Orpheus and Eurydice, Aeneas and Odysseus to the Underworld) seems to be beyond dispute. These *katabatic* elements appear at a higher or lower level of *mimesis*: *aemulatio*, *imitatio* or *interpretatio*, depending on the genre and director's purpose.

The demonstration that a Classical theme as *katabasis* appears in recent cinema shows how it constantly feeds on Classical culture in quest of characters, plots, narrative techniques in order to complement and enhance cinema.

6.2 Spanish

Mi propósito en este trabajo era demostrar la pervivencia en el cine del recurso temático de la *catábasis*, es decir, el descenso del héroe a los infiernos. Para poder alcanzar este objetivo, era necesario desarrollar un método de análisis, partiendo de la noción aristotélica de la mimesis así como de sus diferentes tipos: *aemulatio*, *imitatio* e *interpretatio*. Dicho método consiste en la adaptación de esta división al cine, de manera que una *aemulatio* sería aquella película en la que el recurso aparece de manera sutil, una *imitatio* aparecería en filmes en los que los elementos *catabáticos* se presentan a través de metáforas y simbolismos, y una *interpretatio* sería aquella producción cinematográfica que muestran referencias directas a los mitos clásicos o los mismos personajes con una relación con la cultura clásica fácilmente reconocible.

Como resultado, tanto directores como guionistas recurren a los clásicos en busca de elementos que puedan incluir en las películas, en algunas ocasiones para enriquecer el argumento, en otras, como técnica narrativa, pero en definitiva, estos elementos son reconocibles y por lo tanto, han sido analizados en este trabajo.

Por supuesto, y tal como Cano (1999: 102, *cit. supra*) recuerda, la *contaminatio* tiene un papel fundamental: los directores modifican estos elementos dependiendo de su objetivo. Esto hace posible que podamos encontrar los tres tipos de mimesis en los análisis de filmes elegidos en este estudio. La finalidad era mostrar la variedad de formas en las que se puede adaptar la *catábasis*, no sólo de acuerdo con el nivel de similitud (*μίμησις*) con el mito clásico, sino también su capacidad de adaptación a géneros cinematográficos diversos y de distintas décadas.

Aunque el cine ha experimentado un increíble desarrollo tecnológico, principalmente en efectos especiales y técnicas de rodaje, merece la pena destacar que el recurso temático se ha convertido en un elemento recurrente a lo largo de la historia del cine. Por esta razón, en este estudio se han seleccionado películas estrenadas en diferentes décadas: desde la más antigua, de 1977 (*Star Wars IV: Una nueva esperanza*, George Lucas), hasta la más reciente, estrenada hace apenas unos años, en 2009 (*Harry Potter y el príncipe mestizo*, David Yates), treinta y dos años más tarde.

Los géneros cinematográficos elegidos en este trabajo son fantasía, thriller (suspense) y ciencia ficción. La intención era demostrar la posibilidad de adaptar este recurso en diferentes géneros, y los resultados se pueden consultar en la siguiente tabla:

Género / Mimesis	Aemulatio	Imitatio	Interpretatio
Fantasia			Piratas del Caribe: en el fin del mundo Harry Potter y el príncipe mestizo
Thriller		El silencio de los corderos Deuda de sangre	
Ciencia ficción	Blade Runner	Star Wars IV: Una nueva esperanza	

Los resultados muestran que el género fantástico es más propenso a incluir estos elementos *catabáticos*, que se identifican con el nivel más alto de mimesis. Esto ocurre porque este género favorece a la presencia de criaturas mágicas y mundos fantásticos, elementos que normalmente encontramos en los mitos clásicos (por ejemplo, la conversación con un ser querido fallecido como en *Piratas del Caribe* (Gore Verbinski, 2007), la escena en la que Elizabeth ve a su padre desaparecido en una barca, rodeado

de barcas que transportan otras almas) o el personaje del mistagogo (Dumbledore en *Harry Potter*).

Los thrillers también incluyen *catábasis*, aunque de manera distinta. Ya que es un género en el que no se suelen encontrar elementos mágicos o sobrenaturales, los directores adaptan el recurso a través de metáforas y simbolismos. Y, de hecho, el cine cuenta con las herramientas perfectas para mostrar estos elementos visualmente: la fotografía, juegos de luces, planos cenitales o incluyendo elementos que nos recuerdan irremediablemente al descenso físico, como puede ser un ascensor o unas escaleras como hemos visto en los ejemplos de filmes de suspense.

Esto se aprecia de forma clara en *El silencio de los corderos* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), durante el paseo de Clarice Starling hasta la celda de Lecter, que se encuentra en la planta inferior del psiquiátrico. Su camino hasta allí se muestra con escenas en penumbra y planos cenitales, lo que intensifica visualmente ese descenso físico que se identifica con la *catábasis*. Escenas similares se pueden ver en *Deuda de sangre* (Clint Eastwood, 2002), en el momento en el que el héroe desciende a la parte inferior del barco en busca de sus familiares secuestrados.

Respecto a las películas de ciencia ficción, también aparecen en ellas los elementos *catabáticos*, previamente adaptados. Entre las producciones cinematográficas recogidas en este trabajo encontramos una *catábasis* impura, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), ya que el héroe no completa su misión, pero sí experimenta un enriquecimiento espiritual y encuentra el amor.

Por otra parte, *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) presenta la *catábasis* tal como fue descrita por Joseph Campbell en su idea del monomito. Como consecuencia, el recurso no se toma directamente del mito antiguo, sino que aparece por la influencia de Campbell en George Lucas. De cualquier modo, el monomito se basa en el estudio y comparación de las diferentes mitologías del mundo, incluyendo los mitos grecorromanos, y por tanto, estos elementos *catabáticos* también están presentes.

Lo que encontramos en estas películas de ciencia ficción es una oscilación del nivel de mimesis entre *aemulatio* e *imitatio*. Esto ocurre porque, al igual que en los thrillers, los elementos han sido previamente adaptados y no se muestran exactamente como en el mito antiguo.

En definitiva, la conclusión fundamental nos lleva a demostrar que las películas del género fantástico tienden a mostrar la *catábasis* desde un punto de vista más literal respecto al mito original ya que dicho género se caracteriza precisamente porque los

argumentos se centran en mitología y mundos mágicos. Sin embargo, y como hemos afirmado anteriormente, la *catábasis* también puede adaptarse a géneros más realistas, como los thriller, y en general, a cualquier género.

Otro aspecto especialmente destacable es la caracterización de los héroes. En ninguno de los seis casos analizados, el héroe se identifica completamente con la figura del héroe antiguo (Eneas, Odiseo, Orfeo, etc.). Lo que vemos es que cada héroe comparte ciertas características con los héroes de los mitos, debido a la *contaminatio*: la técnica que consiste en mezclar personajes y sus cualidades de diferentes obras en una sola.

Los héroes de las películas tratadas en este trabajo no encajan perfectamente en el estereotipo del héroe tal como lo encontramos en el mito clásico: Harry Potter es un héroe demasiado joven, Terry McCaleb es un agente jubilado del FBI, Clarice Starling es una mujer... El héroe que más similitudes tiene con los héroes mitológicos es Will Turner, que por ello aparece en la película que se encuentra en el nivel más alto de mimesis, la *interpretatio*.

En conclusión, la presencia de la *catábasis* en cine, así como su adaptación de los mitos clásicos (especialmente el descenso al inframundo de Orfeo, Eneas y Odiseo) es incuestionable. Estos elementos *catabáticos* aparecen en un nivel más alto o más bajo de mimesis (*aemulatio*, *imitatio* o *interpretatio*), dependiendo del género y el objetivo del director o guionista. El hecho de que un recurso clásico como es la *catábasis* aparezca en cine reciente y actual muestra cómo el cinema aún se sigue nutriendo de la cultura y la tradición clásica en la búsqueda de personajes, argumentos, técnicas narrativas, entre otros, para complementarse y enriquecerse.

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