

Classica Ephemera: Interpreting Micro-References to Classical Antiquity  
in Modern Popular Culture

The spate of high-profile releases of films and television programs based on material from ancient Greece and Rome in recent years has overshadowed the even-more frequent incidental references to them in popular culture texts. This paper examines these “micro-references,” brief allusions to the classical past in texts whose subject matter is not primarily “about” antiquity. Such references are often dismissed as “window dressing” and irrelevant to the meaning of the text as a whole (cf. Richard 1995, 1-2). However, given the staggering numbers of such allusions as documented by, e.g., Solomon (1996), we need to engage with micro-references if we are to have a more complete understanding of how the Classics are conceived in and by popular culture.

This paper’s point of departure is the only reference to the Classical world in the action film *Die Hard* (McTiernan 1988) as uttered by antagonist Hans Gruber. Gruber’s allusion to Alexander the Great can be read as a sign of his education (e.g., Cohen 2011), but his choice of Alexander as the content of his allusion is striking given several other Alexander-centric micro-references in 1980s popular culture: the heavy metal band Iron Maiden’s 1986 album *Somewhere in Time* has a song entitled “Alexander the Great”; Ozymandias, one of the antagonists in the comic book series *Watchmen* (1986-87), claims that he has modeled aspects of his life on Alexander’s; and Andy Warhol produced an art piece based on a head of Alexander from an ancient bronze statue. By examining the specific nature of *Die Hard*’s treatment of Alexander in contrast to other popular culture texts of the 1980s, this paper outlines some of the roles of micro-references in depicting the Classical world in popular culture and suggests methods for studying them in the future.

## WORKS CITED

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