Classics 350: Classics and Cinema

Classics 350  # 20087
Summer 2014

Instructor
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Required Texts
Plutarch (1958) Fall of the Roman Republic (R. Warner, translator). Penguin 0-14-044084-4
Suetonius (1979) The Twelve Caesars Penguin 0-14-044072-0

Course Description and Requirements

Description: Literary, artistic, and intellectual achievements of the classic world. Temples, tragedies, and texts. Priests, prostitutes, and proconsuls. Great cultural traditions and influences.

Prerequisites: Completion of the General Education requirement in Foundations of Learning II.C., Humanities required for non-majors. Recommended: Rhetoric and Writing Studies 200.

Ever noticed how often the Romans, who mostly wore white (togs), wore “black hats” in the epic films of Hollywood’s golden age? Somehow (and it’s a somehow we’ll investigate in detail over the course of the semester) the Romans became for Hollywood an Evil Empire against which rebellious heroes and heroines, recognizably proto-American from their choice of value systems and coiffures, fought and triumphed. It’s a tradition revived brilliantly by Lucas in his Star Wars trilogy (I just dated myself—rather badly). The “empire,” a behemoth of a militaristic-political system, thoroughly corrupt at its center, blocks and oppresses the representatives of those sundry, essential values which, if allowed to flourish, will lead directly to the generation of an economically free, democratic (sc., utopian) society of Christian virtue. And the empire always falls (eventually).

One of my favorite little books about Classical Studies says this: “Classics is a subject that exists in the gap between us and the world of the Greeks and the Romans.” The “gap”
is filled by a body of knowledge designed to explain the past to the present (by translating
all manner of texts into language “we” can understand), and by showing “us” what in the
past is worth salvaging and preserving. Classicists are specialists in the stuff in the gap, and
they think of themselves as having great influence over what gets preserved, how it gets
interpreted, and who gets access to it.

At nearly the same time academic classicists have been constructing their highly
specialized field, mass media arts in this country (and Italy, Great Britain, etc) have been
busy jumping into “the gap” with some very interesting notions about what needs to be put
on display from classical antiquity for “us.” What right does Hollywood have appropriating
our academic discipline? How dare they take the past and make it interesting and beautiful
and exiting and funny to mass audiences? Just who do they think they are? Do you sense a
little snobbish tension here? It’s that very competitive tension, the outright envy that
classicists feel when it comes to popular representations of Greece and Rome that will be
one of the more interesting problems we’ll examine in this class.

So, this course is about a rivalry over control of “the gap.” Not only are we going to
examine the ways that ancient classical civilization (primarily Roman civilization, but that
will include views of Greece, Judea, Egypt, western Africa, Spain, etc) has been and
continues to be represented in major cinematic productions of Hollywood and European
studios, we will be critiquing it as to whether it is any better or any worse than the way that
same civilization has been and continues to be represented in classical studies. If the course
is completely successful, it will make you aware of representation and develop your sense
of how there must always be a gap. I want to make you leery of Hollywood blockbusters
about Rome, but I also want to make you leery of academic portrayals of “the way it
actually was” in Rome.

Our analysis of this problem will involve comparison between primary source
documents and modern “documents” of mass media entertainment (movies, TV
productions, novels, and, to some degree, magazines and comic books). We will spend the
semester examining what happens in-between classical texts, which abundantly supply the
material for plots and screenplays, and popular translations of that material. Our work in
the course will be divided between analysis of primary texts from the classical world
(primarily from Roman civilization) and analysis of movies. By the end of course, the student
will be able to identify and comment upon not only the recognizable and distinguishing
features of Roman culture embedded into Roman literature, but the equally recognizable
and distinguishing features of Hollywood’s various interpretations of these classical
documents. These objectives will be met not only through reading quizzes and two short
answer examinations, but through a writing project that will have students modeling a
representation of an ancient document.

Course Objective

“This is an Explorations course in the Humanities and Fine Arts. Completing this course
will help you to do the following in greater depth: 1) analyze written, visual, or performed
texts in the humanities and fine arts with sensitivity to their diverse cultural contexts and
historical moments; 2) describe various aesthetic and other value systems and the ways
they are communicated across time and cultures; 3) identify issues in the humanities that have personal and global relevance; 4) demonstrate the ability to approach complex problems and ask complex questions drawing upon knowledge of the humanities.”

You’re going to four things in this class, and each of the four things can be measured in fairly objectively: 1) demonstrate a basic comprehension of the content of our cinematic and reading passages by responding to fill-in-the-blank reading quizzes at Bb; 2) demonstrate facility at bringing our “texts” to life as complex documents worthy of prolonged engaging by participating in discussion on-line via Blackboard; 3) demonstrate analytical mastery of assigned reading by describing and interpreting essential qualities of key passages from our texts (both cinematic and textual) and applying topics from class discussion to your critical interpretation of these passages (via brief writing assignments and story-boarding); 4) demonstrate mastery understanding of the major facets and components of our treatment of movie narratives by generating your own original “pitch” for a Hollywood blockbuster (by following the directions of the summer’s major writing assignment).

Grading

Evaluation of each student’s progress will involve 1) regular Bb quizzes to accompany both the cinematic and textual assignments: these are very short responses to the documents to guarantee familiarity and exposure; 2) journaling entries in Bb to foster a group discussion about major topics in the week-by-week discussion of themes and topics; 3) two brief essays which will compel you to respond to specific prompts about specific passages in our movies and texts; and 4) a course project that will require you to assemble a creative “pitch” for a movie studio about a movie of your own design: this project will allow you to show mastery of key concepts having to do with necessary elements of design to Sword and Sandal movies.

This class is a lecture course based on my original, complex, and idiosyncratic arguments; there is no “background reader,” and there is no single text source to consult. To succeed, you must pay close attention to podcasts, take notes on key passages discussed, think about assigned readings and show off your ability to respond creatively, sensitively, insightfully, and brilliantly to our community of classical movie watchers. .

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<tr>
<th>Grading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading quizzes and Bb assignments</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Writing Assignment</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Writing Assignment</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<td>The Pitch Project</td>
<td>30%</td>
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Grading Scale

A = 90%
B = 80%
C = 70%
D = 60%
F = below 60%

Classical Civilization 340 Syllabus
Another JAS Production, Pg. 3
(I apply plusses and minuses to grades in the top and bottom 2% of each grade range.)

The Student Disability

If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need accommodations for this class, it is your responsibility to contact Student Disability Services at (619) 594-6473. To avoid any delay in the receipt of your accommodations, you should contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive, and that I cannot provide accommodations based upon disability until I have received an accommodation letter from Student Disability Services. Your cooperation is appreciated.

Intellectual Properties

I reserve ownership of the class and the specific right to monitor and adjust course content (namely the reading schedule which follows) to aid student progress toward the course objectives.