CAMWS

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

28-31 March 2011

Panel Proposal

Presidential Panel in Honor of Julia Hejduk, CAMWS President  
Friday afternoon, on the campus of the Louisiana State University

*Animum pictura pascit inani*:

Screening Roman Myth & Literature on Film and Television

(RE = Reception Studies)

This panel will explore several aspects of the use of classical themes and motifs from Roman mythology and Latin literature in contemporary film and television, with a particular focus on the poet Vergil and his epic tale in the *Aeneid*. While Roman history has been the preferred subject for screening in the ancient-themed epic cinema and on cable television programs, and Greek mythological motifs and literary themes are also ubiquitous on screen, the use of Roman literary and mythological motifs has been much less prominent. This panel will endeavor to explore this question by surveying the existing recreations of and references to Roman literature and its legendary characters on screen. The panel will consist of four papers with multi-media presentations. Each paper will consider social, political, historical, literary and mythological issues and will address how a better understanding of the way ancient Roman mythological and literary themes in film and television can guide our teaching of the Classical Tradition.

Time Requested: 2 hours

AV Requirements: LCD digital projection & sound cables for PPT with embedded video clips.

ABSTRACTS

I. *Dux femina cinematographica*: Dido in Franco Rossi’s *Eneide*

Italian writer-director Franco Rossi (1919-2000) filmed two of the three most influential classical epics for public television, Homer’s *Odyssey* in 1968 and Virgil’s *Aeneid* in 1971. The films, each six hours long,are little known, but they provide us with memorable portrayals of some of the most fascinating women to be encountered in Greek and Roman epic.

In 1910, Italian director Luigi Maggi had based his *Didone abbandonata* on the most famous episode of the *Aeneid*. Half a century later, American bodybuilder-turned-actor Steve Reeves played Aeneas in two Italian costume films, Giorgio Ferroni’s *La guerra di Troia* (1961) and Giorgio Rivalta’s *La leggenda di Enea* (1962). Neither film qualifies as Virgilian. Nor does the modernized Dido of writer-director Lina Mangiacapre’s *Didone non è morta* (1987) or the young Aeneas who unexpectedly appears at the end of Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy* (2004). Rossi’s *Eneide* is the only complete screen adaptation of Virgil’s epic.

Rossi and his co-writers took pains to render the *Aeneid* in a way that does justice to Virgil, if not without some unavoidable changes and omissions. They paid closest attention to the story of Dido and Aeneas. This, their film’s most accomplished part, stands out for its primeval setting (exteriors were filmed in Afghanistan, non-Western costuming, and haunting musical theme, all expressions of Rossi’s will to cinematic style. But it is primarily the regal performance as Dido by Greek actress-singer Olga Karlatou (or Karlatos, as she was billed internationally) that makes the doomed love of Dido and Aeneas and its implications for Roman history not only believable but also meaningful to modern audiences. Classical scholars have regularly focused their attention on the price of empire that Aeneas and, even more, Dido have to pay; Rossi movingly illustrates this fundamental side of the *Aeneid* to general viewers. *Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*: the summation of the proem to the *Aeneid* could well serve as the epigraph to Rossi’s sophisticated and unusual film.

II. Aeneas on Screen

In spite of its inherent cinematic qualities – horrid monsters, bloody battles and a little sex – Virgil’s *Aeneid* has only rarely been available to English speaking viewers on the movie or television screen. The 1971 treatment by Franco Rossi for Italian television certainly indicates that it can be done.

This paper will survey the British and American depictions of Aeneas in non-operatic and non-Shakespearean settings. Beginning with the silent *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927) which exists but is still under restoration, the Robert Wise *Helen of Troy* (1956), the Steve Reeves vehicles *The Trojan Horse* (1961) and *The Avenger* (1962), and finally the very odd permutation in *Troy* (2004), the various representations of Aeneas will be described. There will also be discussion of his absence from *Helen of Troy* (2003) and the use of his name as an alias in both seasons of HBO *Rome* (2006-7).

Among other considerations, this paper will consider the role of the reception of Helen, the deviations from the Virgilian text, and reactions to Italian fascism in pre-war films in the shaping of the cinematic reception of Aeneas. The paper will conclude with some reflections on the Un-American nature of the story by comparison with his depiction in novels as diverse as *Eneas Africanus* (1920) by Harry Stillwell Edwards, *Lavinia* (2008) by Ursula K. LeGuin and the *Troy* series (2005-7) by David Gemmell.

III. *ardescitque tuendo / Phoenissa*: Screening the Roman Female Gaze of Desire

When Dido gazed at Aeneas, Vergil tells us, she burned with desire for him. Modern cinema theory often focuses on the notion of the “gaze,” whereby the subject of the gaze, whether the camera, the spectator, or a character within the film, enters into a hegemonic relationship with the object of the gaze. In her famous essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), feminist film critic Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of “the male gaze” as a feature of power asymmetry. According to Mulvey’s theory, the male gaze occurs in film when the viewer, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, is put into the perspective of a heterosexual male: for example, when the camera lingers on the curves of a woman’s body or lips. In feminist theory, the male gaze expresses an asymmetrical and thus unequal power relationship between the viewer and the viewed, thereby objectifying the female target of the gaze. In mainstream cinema, Mulvey argues, the male gaze typically takes precedence over the female gaze. Indeed, some critics argue that the gaze is inherently male, so that the female gaze can only occur when the woman assumes the male gazer role, that is, she identifies as masculine and thereby objectifies and feminizes the male object of her gaze. Yet other critics suggest the gaze is not the property of one gender (male), thus the female gazer is negotiating her own gendered power hierarchy with the object of her gaze.

This paper will explore the female gaze as portrayed in onscreen representations of the ancient Roman world. As the preferred locus for various types of sexual extremes and even deviant erotic practices, ancient Rome onscreen regularly presents the figure of the sexually aggressive elite female voyeur, from the predatory Empress Poppaea with her rosy-colored spyglass in *Quo Vadis* (1951); to the pampered aristocratic Roman women who ogle bare-chested gladiators at the provincial *ludus* in *Spartacus* (1960); to the arrogant, greedy, social-climbing *dominae* who visually (and later physically) consume the fully naked gladiators on the cable television series *Spartacus: Blood & Sand* (2010) and *Gods of the Arena* (2011). This paper will analyze how the camera lingers on the brawny male objects of the Roman female gaze, suggesting a visual negotiation between alluring male strength and vulnerability, yet also emphasizing the objectification of the male targets: in these scenes, the hierarchy of power is mediated by the cinematography. This paper will also note that the theme of the sexually aggressive elite Roman female voyeur becomes so traditional in the context of the epic cinema that it was an easy mark for comic filmmakers, as in the character of Empress Nympho in *History of the World, Part I* (1981). This paper will conclude by analyzing how the portrayal of the sexually aggressive elite female voyeur, with her explicit ability to be an agent of seduction, while it visually titillates the audience, may also offer a critique of contemporary anxieties about assertive, acquisitive and adulterous female sexuality. In these onscreen representations, the elite Roman female voyeur becomes a symbol of the changing sexual and social roles of modern women.

IV. Homages and Allusions to Vergil in Contemporary Cinema

Vergil was not the most cinematically adaptable of ancient poets. For ancient action the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* dominate the prehistoric period, and the Caesars have long provided characters of greater dramatic potential than *pius Aeneas*. The few representations are discussed in other papers in this panel. However, Vergil has had such a profound influence in literary and pedagogical traditions that there have also been a number of films set in the modern period that pay homage or make significant (or trivial) allusions to his poetry.

An excellent is example is *The Man Without a Face* (1993). a film about a teacher with a mysterious past. The original novel by Isabelle Holland does not include the many Latin allusions in the film, the most notable of which introduces us to the protagonist [Mel Gibson], who reads out loud a clock inscribed with the first four lines of the *Aeneid* just before looking at his horribly scarred face in a mirror. As we will find out, he is the man “tossed on the shores.”

In the opening scene of *Love Comes to the Executioner* (2004), the protagonist [Jonathan Tucker] tells his mother that he wants to become a Latin teacher, and later we learn that he hopes as well to “write” a translation of the *Aeneid*. Learning that Seattle’s schools have discontinued Latin, he obtains a job teaching Latin in a local prison.

The protagonist of *Leaves of Grass* (2009) is a classics professor [Edward Norton], who in one sequence mentions Vergil, the *Aeneid*, dactylic hexameter, and even the hortatory subjunctive. In his DVD commentary writer Tim Blake Nelson tells us that when he was in college he took a class with Martha Nussbaum. This film, like the last, does not maintain a focus on Vergil or the *Aeneid* alone, preferring to branch out into a number of different authors and areas of classical studies.

Several films use thematic borrowings, most notably the cave “marriage” of *Aeneid* 4, e.g. *Wings of the Dove* (1997), *Move Over Darling* (1963).

Another small group focus on Vergil as an expert on the afterlife, e.g. *Searching for Paradise* (2002) and *The Core* (2004).

A very interesting adaptation and variation of Vergil’s description of Aristeas and Eurydice [*Georgics* 4.453-527] is found in James Ivory’s *City of Your Final Destination* (2008), derived from a Peter Cameron novel. Here the young scholar/author Omar Razaghi [Omar Metwally] wants to write biography of the recently deceased author, Jules Gund. The first morning of his visit to his home in rural Uruguay Omar is given bread and honey from their own land. Gund’s former mistress Arden Langdon [Charlotte Gainsbourg] asks him what he knows about bees. He knows that the word “apiary” derives from Latin *apis*. Meanwhile in the background we have been hearing “Che farò senza Euridice?” from Gluck *Orfeo*, Act III. We hear the music when we see the mistress in the garden being eyed by the writer; while the writer’s girlfriend calls from the US; and it peaks when the film introduces the widow [Laura Linney], i.e. who lost her husband—that is, the reverse of Orpheus losing his wife. We still hear it while the camera focuses on her looking into a mirror—no doubt an homage to Cocteau’s *Orfée*. Omar summarizes: “You read a book, and you think all about the place. But you don’t really think it exists, let alone that you’ll be there.”