

## Panel

### Philmology: Tracing Relations between Films and the Ancient World

Lorenzo F. Garcia, Jr. (University of New Mexico), organizer

Panels devoted to films depicting life in the ancient world or renditions of works from ancient literature are often content to point out various allusions, note historical (in)accuracies, and ultimately criticize the film in question as a poor reading of a given Classical text. The film is typically reduced to a product of insufficient scholarly knowledge, valuable only as a negative example of ‘good’ philology that we Classicists are trained to apply to texts.

Members of this panel share a belief in a different approach to cinema which does not hold film study and Classical philology as mutually exclusive. Each of the papers in this panel aim to incorporate the philological principles that Classicists apply to studying ancient works of art to modern cinematic treatments of those works. This panel will treat the relations between cinema and Classical texts, tropes, and themes in terms of reception, identity, the ideology of genre, and the visual narrative of the ancient texts themselves.

The first paper treats the very practice of ‘reception studies’ by investigating the various possible relations between a film and its source text—here, Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannos*. A director’s treatment of ancient material effectively invites us to join in a reinterpretation of that text by providing a coherent reading of it. The second paper treats ethnic identification—an overlooked aspect of the Roman heritage in films about Italian-American mobsters. The tradition extends from Little Caesar, whose classical reference is obvious, to *The Sopranos*, which contained several disquisitions on ancient Rome, while the television series *Rome*, contained readily identifiable *Mafiosi* trying to muscle Vorenius. No genre of film (apart from historical representations) depicts so many themes drawn from classical literature as the western. In the third paper, *Shane* is not much discussed in terms of classical parallels, but this paper shows a complex relationship with Homer and Virgil, among others. The fourth paper shows the affinity between Homeric descriptive narrative and the actual cinematic technique of Sergei Eisenstein. The paper calls for Classicists to understand more about film technique as a means of description and exposition of ancient epic poetry.

Degrees of Invitation: How to Recognize Oedipus in a Dark Alley  
Life Blumberg (University of Iowa)

All films that involve classical material have different relationships with their sources. Some, like Guthrie's 1957 *Oedipus Rex*, are a direct presentation of a specific ancient text and, as such, invite their viewers to evaluate and enjoy them based on skill and innovation in presentation, interpretation of character and motivation, ability to create emotional response, etc. Most films, however, are more selective: perhaps only a theme, a character, or an image is used; or maybe a character reads a classical work that influences his thoughts or actions; perhaps a mythic narrative is present in an adapted form; or possibly the film contains a mythic archetype that resonates with those in classical literature and myth.

The Oedipus theme in particular has appeared in cinema since its inception and, thanks to Freud, has remained a frequent guest of the cinematic realm, but the degree to which it is present, or the degree to which the audience is invited to consider its presence, varies with each film. In *Angel Heart* (Parker, 1987), for instance, the audience is explicitly invited to consider the classical source only at the very end of the film with the revelation of Angel's identity and a quote from Sophocles' Tiresias. This encourages the audience to consider the film as an Oedipus-story only retrospectively so that the revelation causes the viewer to look back on the film with a new interpretive vision. In such Oedipally-themed films as *Chinatown* and *Wise Blood* the invitation to consider the source is never explicitly offered, yet knowing the source and considering it deepens one's understanding of and appreciation for those films.

In contrast, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Oedipus Mayor* (Triana, 1996) explicitly invites the viewers from the very beginning to think of the film in terms of its original source. Its title, the use of character names, and the faithful use of plot elements signal from the very beginning that this is not only Oedipus, but Sophocles' *Oedipus*. For this reason the audience immediately asks, and moreover is encouraged and invited to ask, "Is this just the same as Sophocles? Is it going to be different?" The answer is Yes, of course, it is different, but more importantly the viewer's reception of the invitation to seek and interpret that difference crucially influences his or her experience of the film. Thus, the invitation to consider the source in detail is intrinsic to the interpretation of the material. In the case of *Oedipus Mayor*, the discrepancy between the Sophoclean source and Marquez' adaptation reveals the nature of Marquez' distinctive revision of the ancient myth in that it reveals the importance Marquez places on Oedipus' essential ignorance and innocence.

Augustus in the *Mezzogiorno*: The Role of the Roman Past in Constructing Ethnic Identity  
Vincent E. Tomasso (Stanford University)

Characters on HBO's television series *The Sopranos* constantly debate, explicitly or implicitly, what it means—or should mean—to be an Italian-American. While the mobsters point to their ancestral roots in the *mezzogiorno*, in the idealized poverty of southern Italy and Sicily, other Italian-Americans decry the mass media's stereotyping of their ethnicity as uneducated thugs. In this paper I argue that *The Sopranos*' characters' allusions to the Roman past are implicitly positioned as a part of this continuing discourse about Italian-American ethnicity, though ultimately such references fail to construct any meaningful sense of identity for the characters. This failure is intentional in that the series, while affirming the usefulness of the past, at the same time denies that it has significance for the contemporary world of *The Sopranos*.

Although Italians have employed Roman antiquity to strengthen their own sense of national and ethnic identity—particularly during the independence movement of the late nineteenth century and with Mussolini's doctrine of *romanità* in the 1920s and 30s—mass media portrayals of Italian-Americans have rarely used the cultural prestige of Rome to articulate any sense of ethnicity. Several entries in the gangster film genre, which is ironically (though intentionally) criticized by a number of *The Sopranos*' characters for its role in the stereotyping of Italian-Americans, have appropriated the Classics, but they generally do not refer in specific ways to Roman history or society, nor do they use it to articulate their narratives except for the most broad thematic strokes. In Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* (1931), for instance, the villainous mobster's fall is given further tragic weight through the insistent reference to the fall of another overly-ambitious (Roman) individual. The parallel, however, is never made more concrete than that.

*The Sopranos*' characters, by contrast, refer repeatedly and in detail to specific aspects of Roman culture and history. In the first season Tony uses Caesar Augustus as an exemplum: Junior should be benevolent to his subordinates and share his power as boss. When his crew travels to Italy to meet another crime family in Naples, Tony is taken to the Sibyl's cave and dreams of himself costumed as a centurion. Ralph Cifaretto is constantly quoting Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* in the third season, which provides a stark contrast to other claims on Roman antiquity in *The Sopranos*: it refers to a modern popular reception of Rome rather than Rome itself, and it also uses "Rome" as an excuse for sadistic violence. In these moments we are asked to read Italian-American ethnicity through the prism of Roman antiquity, but, because such moments are typically undermined by the responses of other characters or the outcome of the discourse itself, such references at the same time collapse upon themselves.

The Classical Western Archetype: *Shane* via Greek and Roman Epic  
Kirsten Day (Augustana College)

This paper examines the iconic film *Shane* as a means of furthering the discussion of the Western genre as an American counterpart to Greek and Roman epic, a parallel recognized by Martin Winkler as early as 1985 and more fully elucidated in 1997 by Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand. As Blundell and Ormand argue, like Classical epic, Western film is a “vehicle[] of the ideology of manhood,” which “stands in a similar relation to the viewer as the Homeric epic did to its original audience” (1997.536). My examination of *Shane* will explore this dynamic, along with other themes these two genres have in common, such as leadership and community, identity, honor, hospitality, and property rights. I will also explore *Shane*’s particular connections to the *Odyssey* in its concern with women’s fidelity, a boy’s coming-of-age, the protagonist’s anti-heroic qualities, and the ultimate exclusion of the hero from the society which he redeems. In addition, I will touch on *Shane*’s affinities with Vergil’s *Aeneid*, where the hero’s exclusion, along with subtle challenges to the dominant perspective, serve to call attention to the problems inherent in nation-building and to question the ideologies that the genre itself initially seems to promote. The echoes of ancient epic themes and characters that emerge and recede, intertwining and resounding throughout *Shane* suggest that both Classical epic and Western film, standing as they do on the frontier of civilization in their respective cultures, concern themselves with similar problems and anxieties and promote idealized notions of manhood in ways that are neither simplistic nor unproblematic. This intersection provides a fruitful opportunity for helping modern audiences to understand antiquity through a more familiar lens.

Reading Text like Film: Tracing Cinematic Conventions in Ancient Texts  
Lorenzo F. Garcia, Jr. (University of New Mexico)

Cinema studies has provided the field of Classics ample material to study the reception of ancient literature and history through providing vivid ‘readings’ of antiquity as well as examples of the very creative process by which the ancients crafted their narratives. I wish to demonstrate a different direction of Classical film studies and look at film form within Classical texts by analyzing two visually evocative scenes in Homer’s *Iliad*—the beginning of the ‘Battle at the Wall’ at *Iliad* 12.141-161 and Achilles’ fight with the river Skamandros in Book 21—in terms of cinematic conventions, with an eye toward adding some cinematic terms to the philologist’s box of tricks.

I will draw upon a cinematic model, informed by examples from the films of Sergei Eisenstein (*Strike* [1924], *Battleship Potemkin* [1925], *October* [1927], and *Alexander Nevsky* [1938]), to analyze the scenes from the *Iliad* in terms of *mise en scène* (setting, character, costume, choreography, and lighting), framing (camera angle, height, and distance), duration of shot, and editing (cut, fade/dissolve, wipe, cross-cutting, match-cutting, etc.) as a means to provide a ‘visual’ reading of Homer. My goal is to demonstrate the degree to which the Homeric epic directs its audience’s and readers’ imaginations through the manipulation of language. I argue that Homer’s language provides very precise information by which we may determine how to visualize the actions and narrative spaces. In other words, I argue that the *Iliad* may function as a ‘shooting script.’ My approach finds confirmation in a recent article by Martin Winkler on the cinematic aspects of the *Iliad* and Wolfgang Peterson’s film *Troy* (USA, 2004), for Winkler observes,

To an astonishing degree, the *Iliad*, the very first work of Western literature, reveals features of the art of cinematic storytelling long before modern technology made this art a reality. That is to say, the *Iliad* provides a director with numerous clues for translating its story to the screen. The text, as it were, contains its own screenplay, with staging directions, hints at camera angles, and points about editing.<sup>1</sup>

I will try to show how Homer directs our “mind’s eye” through descriptive language. I must stress that my reading here is but one interpretation, though, I think, a careful and defensible one. My goal is to make clear the degree to which the *Iliad* calls out for us to treat it cinematically, and the degree to which we already—whether consciously or not—do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Winkler, “The *Iliad* and the Cinema,” *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, ed. Winkler: 43-67 (Blackwell, 2007), 50.