

**Panel Proposal: Practice and Perception of Black Classicism: Representations of Race in Films and Television about the Ancient World**

**Part II of the Presidential Panel in Honor of Michele Valerie Ronnick, CAMWS President**

Category: (PL/PG Pedagogy Greek and Latin)

Organizer Michele V. Ronnick                      Presiding, TBA

This panel of four papers will explore several different aspects of the representation of race in popular films and television programs set in the ancient world, as well as in films and television programs that utilize classical mythological and literary plots, themes, and archetypes. After the presentation of this work done by well-known scholars of classics and cinema / popular culture will come with a response from a noted scholar of film, literature and cultural studies. Individual papers will consider social, political, historical, literary and cinematic issues. They will address various portrayals of and references to race in films and television programs about the ancient world and explore their significance to our understanding and teaching of the Classical Tradition. Each paper will be illustrated with Power Point presentations of images and clips.

- 1) Magic, Music and Race: The *Black Orpheus* Effect.
- 2) The Defiant Ones: Black and White in the Arena.
- 3) Fade to Black: Reflections of Race in Film and Television Versions of the Cleopatra Legend.
- 4) From *Black Caesar* to *Freedom Writers*: The Black Experience via Greco-Roman Allusions in Popular Cinema.

Respondent: Catherine A. John (University of Oklahoma), Professor of Afro-Caribbean and African American Literature and Culture, department of English; affiliated with the African American Studies and the Film and Video Studies programs.

(Note: the respondent has enthusiastically confirmed her participation)

Requested time: 2 hours

Abstracts

Paper #1 Magic, Music and Race: The *Black Orpheus* Effect

Film scholars and fans have long discussed the stock character known in movie circles as “the Magic Negro.” This is typically a supporting role, played by a black actor, who uses special powers or perceptions to help the white protagonist get out of trouble,

achieve his goals or even find his soul.<sup>1</sup> The term dates back to the late 1950s, about the time when Sidney Poitier sacrificed himself to save Tony Curtis in *The Defiant Ones* (1958). Director Spike Lee satirized the stereotype in *Bamboozled* (2000), and later popularized the term by mocking the figure as the “super-duper magical Negro.” Writers and filmmakers endow this character with mystical abilities, and often make him saintly, numinous or otherworldly. Recent examples include Whoopi Goldberg as the psychic in *Ghost* (1990); Michael Clarke Duncan as the wrongly-convicted miracle healer in *The Green Mile* (1999); Will Smith as the mysterious golf caddy in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000); Don Cheadle as a meddlesome guardian angel in *The Family Man* (2000); Morgan Freeman as God in *Bruce Almighty* (2003); and of course, Laurence Fishburne as Morpheus, a renegade demigod, in *The Matrix* (1999). Each of these characters offers a particularly divine type of intervention in the cinematic plot to work his magic.

This paper will explore how films that take their themes from ancient Greek mythology and literature portray the role of “the Magic Negro” within a distinctive paradigm, where this character is more autonomous, but still gifted with supernatural talents. This paper will argue it all started with the film *Black Orpheus* (*Orfeu Negro*, 1959), an adaptation of the Greek myth of the musician, Orpheus, set in the modern context of the musical-religious festival of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. The character of Orpheus was played by Afro-Brazilian actor, Breno Mello, thereby establishing a visual archetype for the role of the magical musician figure. The pattern was followed in the casting of British actor Adrian Lester as Orpheus in the television movie *Jason and the Argonauts* (2000), and continued in the film in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), and adaptation of Homer’s *Odyssey*, with the two mystical roles of the “Blind Seer,” played by Lee Weaver, and uncanny musician Tommy Johnson, played by Chris Thomas King. Indeed, the precedent has become so ubiquitous that the type can now be parodied, as in *Scary Movie 3* (2003) with the comic roles of Aunt ShaNeequa (Queen Latifah) and her husband, Orpheus (Eddie Griffin). The pattern is also now strong enough to shape the magic figure by simply assuming he has musical abilities, as in the case of a character on HBO’s new vampire drama, *True Blood* (2008-). Here the character of “Eggs” Benedict Talley, played by Mehdad Brooks, is a close companion to the maenad, Maryann, and joins in her Dionysian revels. Because he is an African-American character associated with an ancient Greek mythological theme onscreen, “Eggs” is shown strumming a guitar in many of his scenes. Under the “*Black Orpheus* Effect,” he is rendered both mystical and musical.

1 Rita Kempley, “Movies’ ‘Magic Negro’ Saves the Day – but at the Cost of His Soul,” *The Black Commentator* 49 (7/03/2003).

Paper # 2 The Defiant Ones: Black and White in the Arena

That ancient Rome has been both a positive and a negative role model for the United States is well known. Debates about slavery and race relations in popular American culture have often presented progressive viewpoints by means of plots set in ancient Rome. Robert Montgomery Bird’s *The Gladiator* (1831), a historical drama about

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Spartacus, is an example from early American literature. Although no black characters appear on stage, Spartacus' fight against oppression and for freedom and dignity anticipates some of the arguments raised more forcefully in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

In the twentieth century the cinema took over the theater's prominence as a mass medium with the ability to express social and cultural undercurrents. American films set in antiquity regularly present the struggles of social underdogs or religious minorities against their oppressors. Such films tend to be largely action-oriented. Their arena sequences point to contemporary issues, especially when black and white gladiators are pitted against each other. Sometimes this happens only incidentally, as in C. B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), but sometimes it is a notable part of the plot, as in Delmer Daves's *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954). In Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), Steve Carver's *The Arena* (1974), and Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) the relations between white and black gladiators, both male and female, take on central significance.

This paper will address the portrayal of black and white gladiators in the films mentioned above and examine in greater detail some of their directors' specific cinematic techniques. In *Spartacus*, the actual spark for the slave revolt is provided by the near-Stoic attitude and the noble death of Draba, the fictional black gladiator whom Spartacus is forced to fight for the delectation of decadent Romans. The black fighters in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* and *Gladiator* are, as it were, Draba's precursor and successor, respectively. *The Arena*, an exploitation potboiler, gives a particular twist to these gladiators' interracial bond by telling a comparable story whose protagonists are women. These films convey the degrading side of slavery and racial tensions more effectively than does *The Defiant Ones* (1958), producer-director Stanley Kramer's noble-minded but rather preachy modern story.

### Paper #3 Fade to Black: Reflections of Race in Film and Television Versions of the Cleopatra Legend

In a sumptuous scene set at a Roman party in the 1934 C.B. de Mille *Cleopatra* film, the conversation turns to Cleopatra and one of the young women asks, "Is she Black?" They all laugh and so would the audience, not only because they had been watching Claudette Colbert in the role, but also because the very expression of the question challenged contemporary assumptions about her race, her gender role and her sexuality. This paper will examine how films and television have reflected and helped to change contemporary American attitudes toward race.

Although I will begin with a brief survey of the current debate<sup>2</sup> about the historical Cleopatra's racial and ethnic background, I will concentrate on its depiction in her reception in general but in nineteenth and twentieth century America in particular.<sup>2</sup> I will only address the concerns of Afro-centrists and their detractors where they are reflected in the on-screen receptions.

The next section of this paper will treat those films and TV shows in which

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Cleopatra is depicted as white and/or Greek and will concentrate on the treatment of racial issues and characters. This will encompass not only Black Africans but also the Middle East and Orientalism.<sup>3</sup> Films to be discussed in this section will include the 1917 Theda Bara, the 1934 Claudette Colbert and the 1963 Elizabeth Taylor *Cleopatras*. Also discussed will be several examples of 1950s and 1960s Sword and Sandal epics, television mini series such as *Julius Caesar*, *Imperium* and *Rome*, as well as the *Asterix: Mission Cleopatra* live action film. Special attention will be paid to the treatment of Cleopatra's handmaidens, Iras and Charmion.

The next section will treat films and television shows in which Cleopatra was depicted as either black or racially mixed. These will include the X-rated *Notorious Cleopatra*, Beyonce in *Dreamgirls*, Gina Torres in an episode of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, the exotic looking Leonor Varela and namesakes in *Cleopatra Jones* and *Set it Off*, all arising from what Royster has called "the African American Counter-narrative."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Sally Ann Ashton, *Cleopatra and Egypt* (London: Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth Century American Egyptomania* (Durham: Duke, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Maria Wyke, *The Roman Mistress* (Oxford: OUP, 2002) 244-78.

<sup>4</sup> Francesca T. Royster, *Becoming Cleopatra: The Shifting Image of an Icon* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

#### Paper # 4 From *Black Caesar* to *Freedom Writers*: The Black Experience via Greco-Roman Allusions in Popular Cinema

Since the 1980s filmmakers have regularly inserted allusions to the ancient world, particularly Greece and Rome, into contemporary settings. These allusions have appeared in so many high-profile American films aimed at demographically varied audiences, and for so many years, that intentionality is evident. Moreover, film producers, writers, and directors frequently explore different dimensions of the ancient world and use them effectively in formulating their film's themes or sub-messages.

The films I will discuss in this presentation contain black actors and/or black themes. I have identified over sixty such films, ranging chronologically from 1962's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and 1973's *Black Caesar* to 2007's *Freedom Writers*, *Feast of Love*, and *Epic Movie*. In general the range of perspectives in these films reflects the spectrum of the black experience in the non-cinematic world. Woody Strode's "Pompey" character in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* represents the remnants of antebellum slavery and Reconstruction. The Blaxploitation films of the 1970s created a black urban stereotypical gangster like "Black Caesar." Black athletes and coaches are represented in *The Program* and *Remember the Titans*; the former features a football player failing in school but succeeding on the field, while the Denzel Washington character in the latter parallels the educated blacks in such films as *Akeelah and the Bee*

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and *Lucky Number Slevin*. The use of Latin ranges from the politically controversial *Malcolm X* to the sophomoric hip-hop subtitles in the faun house of *Epic Movie*. Allusions to Cleopatra appear as single lines (*The Net*) and as featured spectacles (*Dreamgirls*), an echo of the Blaxploitation era. Finally, the teaching of the *Odyssey* directly confronts urban Los Angelinos of mixed race in *Freedom Writers*.