CL220 THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN FILM AND FACT

Course description
This course builds upon the emerging new interdisciplinary field that combines the historical study of the Roman Empire with the study of contemporary cinematic arts that depict the ancient world. Moving beyond film as pure entertainment, we will analyze select productions both in terms of their historical accuracy, and as portrayals that reflect our own modern perspectives and shape our understanding of the past. Within this context, we will consider the historical evidence on ancient political figures, social conditions and religious developments as well as, importantly, the limits of the evidence available today from the ancient world. In parallel, the course will trace the historical development of cinematic productions that engage with the Roman world in a chronological format, beginning with the 1916 Italian Cabiria and concluding with the 2011 UK-US The Eagle. We will also engage with the methodology of film studies to develop a critical perspective through which we can examine select productions covering the past six decades. Ultimately, our main objective of the course is to learn to appreciate and to evaluate both historical arguments and cinematic representations critically—based on an understanding of Roman history as both historical reality and the subject of historical representation.

Grading
Preparation, participation and presentation in classes: 35% of your final grade.

Preparation and participation (25%): all sessions, including those reserved for the screenings, are mandatory. In regular class sessions, you must not only be present, but also act as an active participant: this includes having prepared the assigned readings and envisioning questions or comments relevant for the day’s focus points.

Presentation (10%): In one class you, alone or with a fellow student, will be asked to act as the expert both from a historical and a cinematic perspective. I will assist you with the preparation for this session, but in the end you will be responsible for the presentation itself, in which you will need to consider both cinematic and historical reviews.

Writing: 30% of your final grade.

Paper (20%): a 2000-2500-word paper due in the penultimate class. Topics will be available or can be picked upon consultation with me.

Film review or opinion piece (10%): this can be related to any of the movies seen as part of the class. The goal is to make a critical argument, whether as a film critic, as a historian or as a citizen, concerning a cinematic production and its relevance to your life today. This piece will be due in Class 17, the week after the midterm exam.

Examinations: 35% of your final grade.

Two cumulative exams: a midterm (15%) and a final (20%), covering ancient and modern material. Note: no make-up, except for extreme cases.

◊ Discussions with the instructor. You are encouraged to discuss any questions about the course with me during my office hours. It is a good idea to plan to come see me at least once during the semester to talk about the course and your paper.

◊ Attendance policy: You need to attend class to be able to complete this course. More than three unexcused absences will result in a lower final grade. Note also the CAS policy on in completes: this is an extreme option available only in special cases.
Plagiarism and cheating: The Academic Conduct Code is available online http://www.bu.edu/academics/files/2011/08/AcademicConductCode.pdf and offers detailed information on what qualifies as cheating and plagiarism. In class, we shall discuss how you can avoid cheating and develop a writing style of your own.

**Required textbooks (available at Barnes and Noble on Kenmore Square):**


**Required movies (will be screened, but can also be purchased at your discretion):**

*Quo Vadis* (1951)
*Spartacus* (1960)
*Cleopatra* (1963)
*Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979)
HBO *Rome* (2005-7 television series, episodes 10, 12 from Season 1)
*Gladiator* (2000)

**Screenings**
Although we shall look at clips from the relevant films in class, you will also be required to participate in weekly screenings of the full versions of the films (unless otherwise specified, for each week, in the detailed schedule below). The final schedule of these screenings will be distributed on the second day of classes: each film will be screened twice to allow all students to participate.

**Schedule of classes**

**Week 1: no screening**

**Class 1:** A short introduction into studying the intersections of history and film.
Study questions: Where do we get our knowledge of the past? What role does watching films and television with relevant topics play? Can you think of any problems in such visual representations and their ‘popular history’ (e.g. is it serious, is it reliable)?

**Class 2:** The language and problems of cinematic presentation: the six sins
Study questions: List the “six filmic sins” identified by Hughes-Warrington. What do you think is lost with each of these problems, and who would be troubled by it the most?

**Week 2: Screening: Cabiria (1916, selection)**

**Class 3:** Discovering ancient Rome
Study questions: How have ways of learning about ancient Rome changed with time?
Read: Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World, ch.1 (Discovering ancient Rome, pp. 10-25)

**Class 4**: Early cinema with Roman themes: whose issues?

Study questions: How is the exploitation of ancient Rome different in the case of the epic *Cabiria* (1916) and in the hands of Mussolini?

Read: M.M. Winkler, “*Cabiria*: The intersection of cinema and politics,” (Winkler 2009, ch. 5, pp. 94-121)

Presentation: *Cabiria*

**Week 3: Screening: Quo Vadis (1951)**

**Class 5**: *Quo Vadis* (1951): an introduction

Study questions: Write a summary of the movie’s plot. What themes and concerns emerge? How are these similar and different from what we observed in the case of *Cabiria*?


Presentation: *Quo Vadis*

**Class 6**: *Quo Vadis* (1951) and history

Study question: List the major features of the Roman imperial cult. Discuss how these would be a matter of opposition for early Christians.

Read: Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World ch. 3: The emperors (pp. 48-67); ch. 11: The gods of empire (pp. 256-289).

**Week 4: optional screening of Ben Hur (1959) in full**

**Class 7**: *Quo Vadis* (1951): the filmmakers’ version

Study question: Knowing what you know of Roman history now, discuss what the makers of *Quo Vadis* included and emphasized, and, in turn, left out.

Read: Cyrino, ch. 1

Presentation: Sienkiwicz’s novel, “Quo Vadis”

**Class 8**: *Ben Hur*

Study question: Compare and contrast how *Quo Vadis* and *Ben Hur* depict the Roman empire and the emerging role of Christians.

Read: Cyrino, ch. 3

Presentation: *Ben Hur*

**Week 5: Screening Spartacus (1960)**

**Class 9**: Spartacus

Study question: Identify the values *Spartacus* associates with the slave leader and his followers.

Read: Cyrino, ch. 4

Presentation: *Spartacus*

**Class 10**: *Spartacus* and history

Study question: How does the theme of *Spartacus*, the film, fit with the social concerns expressed in the ancient slave revolt?

Read: Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World ch. 6: Domination (pp. 108-137)
**Week 6: Screening Cleopatra (1963)**

**Class 11:** Us and them: Fantasies of free and slave in history and in cinema

Study question: Compare and contrast the values attributed to free men/slaves, Roman/non-Roman in *Spartacus* and *Cleopatra*.


**Class 12:** *Cleopatra*, the movie

Study question: How does the film use “Egypt” and “the Egyptian queen” to represent a Roman experience of otherness?

Read: Cyrino, ch. 5 (“Cleopatra,” pp. 121-158)

Presentation: Cleopatra

**Week 7: No screening**

**Class 13:** *Cleopatra* and history

Study question: Compare and contrast the representation of civil war as it appears in the movie and as it was seen by Roman contemporaries.

Read: *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World* ch. 2: The Republic (pp. 26-47)

**Class 14:** Messages

Study question: Try to come up with three “characteristics” of ancient Romans that the films we have viewed identify. Are these characteristics historically factual? What relevance might the history of the US in the mid-twentieth century have for such representations?


**Week 8: Screening History of the World, Part I (1981) The Roman Empire Sequence**

**Class 15:** Midterm examination

**Class 16:** *History of the World*, Part I (1981) The Roman Empire Sequence

Study question: Can you think of reasons that contributed to an interest in comic representations of the Roman empire in the late 1970s and 1980s?

Read: Cyrino, ch. 8

Presentation: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*

**Week 9: Screening Monty Python’s Life of Brian (1979)**

**Class 17:** Monty Python’s Life of Brian (1979)

Study question: How does the film parody the clichés of earlier Roman and biblical epic movies?

Read: Cyrino, ch. 7 (pp. 176-193)

Presentation: Monty Python’s Life of Brian
Class 18: Life in the Roman Empire
Study question: What characteristics of life in the Roman empire does historical scholarship focus on? How does Roman interest in money and wealth feature in these depictions?
Read: Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World ch. 4: An Imperial People (pp. 68-89) and ch. 12: The Profits of Empire (pp. 290-3190)

Week 10: Screening HBO Rome (2005-7 television series, episodes 10, 12 from Season 1)
Class 19: The controversy of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ (2004)
Study question: What do you think about the boundaries of what one should be allowed to ridicule in a democratic society? Should such boundaries exist? Should they be set by the state or by fellow citizens?

Class 20: HBO Rome
Study question: Compare HBO’s Rome to earlier television adaptations of Roman history. Can you explain the differences?
Presentation: BBC I, Claudius

Week 11: Optional screening of two episodes from BBC’s I, Claudius
Class 21: HBO Rome as history?
Study question: Compare the emphases of HBO Rome with those of the history textbook (e.g. the one assigned for today’s reading).

Class 22: Projections
Study question: What cultural projections, similar to those identified by Joshel, can you recognize in HBO’s Rome?

Week 12: Screening Gladiator (2000)
Class 23: Gladiator, the film
Study question: How does the film relate to earlier, epic depictions of Roman history? How does the apparent corruption of power shape the image of Rome in Gladiator?
Read: Cyrino, ch. 9 (pp. 207-256)
Presentation: Gladiator

Class 24: Gladiator in history
Study question: What functions do games, sport and gladiatorial, have in the Roman world? What are the social associations of this kind of entertainment?
Read: Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World ch. 9: An Empire of Cities (pp. 200-231)

**Week 13: Screening The Eagle (2011)**

**Class 25:** Fictionalizing history

Study question: What weight does the historicity of Roman films carry in recent productions?

**Class 26:** “Romans” (and “Greeks”) for the twenty-first century

Study question: Can you identify any trends in recent films (such as The Eagle or Troy) that differ from what we saw earlier in the course?
Presentation: Troy

**Week 14: No screening**

**Class 27:** History, memory, cinema. PAPERS DUE

Study question: How does the medium of cinema challenge what we understand as Roman history?

**Class 28:** Final review

**Final exam**

**Further bibliography:**


