

Real to reel: Ancient Greece and Rome in the movies

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Was "Spartacus" an anti-fascist polemic? Does "Agora" demonstrate the horrors of anti-science religious zealotry? Did the Trojans really dress only in blue and white outfits? Quiz: Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor in un-credited roles plus 32,000 costumes.

The answers are yes, yes, no and "Quo Vadis."

Since 1914, more than 600 movies have been set in ancient Greece or Rome or in some way employ their history and literature. These movies offer varying degrees of historical accuracy and often mirror contemporary fears and concerns.

A sampling of antiquity-themed films will be examined in depth in the course "The Ancient World in the Movies" to be taught at the University at Buffalo this fall by UB classicist Donald McGuire, PhD.

Students will watch 13 excellent films, attend two lectures a week and read critical material in a quest to understand why we keep looking at the past, where the populist version of the ancient life comes from and how such movies have reflected and represented present day issues.

Weekly screenings will be free and open to the public on Sundays at 7 p.m., Sept. 2 through Dec. 2, in Room 330 of the Student Union, UB North Campus.

The "Greek" films to be screened and studied are "Troy" (2004), airing

Sept. 2; "Ulysses" (1954) on Sept. 9; the horrifying "Iphigenia" (1977) on Sept. 23; the Ulyssean comedy "O, Brother Where Art Thou?" (2000) on Sept. 30; "300" (2007) on Oct. 7; "Black Orpheus" on Nov. 25; and "Chinatown" on Dec. 2.

The films set during Roman Empire are "Cabiria" (1914), a silent melodrama set during the Punic Wars (and featuring the child-eating god Moloch), on Oct. 14; "Spartacus" (1960) on Oct. 21; "Gladiator" (2000) on Oct. 28; "Quo Vadis" (1951) on Nov. 4; and "Ben Hur" (1959) on Nov. 11.

Five of these are widely considered among the top 10 sword and sandal movies ever made. Twelve have received several Academy Awards, and most feature a cast of major film stars directed by the best in the business.

"I'm looking forward to viewing these movies from many different angles," says McGuire. "For example, on some levels many of them are about the same thing -- gladiators, for instance, or the Trojan War. And yet the movies differ wildly in what they show and how they show it.

"Also, because film is a medium that frequently uses history or fantasy to address what, for the audience, is too close to home, we will consider the contemporary situations to which these films speak," McGuire says.

"'Agora,' for instance, considers the plight of science in a period of intense religious and sectarian conflict and considerable anti-intellectual fanaticism," he says, "In this case it resulted in the mob murder of the Alexandrian polymath Hypatia, but 1,500 years later, these attitudes and behaviors are alive and well and just as violent, even in this country. Just listen to the radio."

He adds, "We will also look at how many earlier classics-based films,

especially 'Spartacus,' are grounded in ancient history but speak to common mid-20th century American concerns such as the Cold War and the internal trauma provoked by demagogues like Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities or HUAC."

The committee, which Harry Truman called "the most un-American thing in the country today," was of particular interest to filmmakers because in 1948 it created the Hollywood blacklist and "Red Channels" list, which destroyed the careers and reputations of thousands in the film, radio and television industries; in government, unions, the arts and well beyond. At the same time, it promoted the production of films and television programs that fed the red-scare hysteria.

McGuire points out that in "Spartacus" actor/producer Kirk Douglas, as the historical slave and gladiator, leads a massive revolt against the excesses of the [Roman Empire](#). Off screen, the gutsy Douglas went mano a mano with HUAC, an act that essentially ended the blacklist and allowed banned filmmakers to return to the industry.

The inclusion of "Chinatown" (1974), the complex film noir set in 1937 Los Angeles, might surprise some, but McGuire says the movie is included because it "employs of elements of the Oedipus myth to enrich and complicate the plot. The story reflects the oedipal journey from ignorance to knowledge, a slowly unraveling mystery, family secrets, incest, shot-out eye and shattered lives."

"Some films take liberties to produce a deliberately campy mish-mash of everything from acting styles to geographical landscapes and costumes," he says, citing the 2004 film, "Troy," in which "brown, tweedy, leathery Greeks set out to destroy the sunny-skied, blue-and-white Troy."

"I enjoyed the movie," he says, "which in some respects is accurate and in other ways is a takeoff on the genre. It is visually spectacular, and

performances by Peter O'Toole and Brian Cox Julie were great, but the writing isn't very good and the movie kills off Menelaus, which certainly wasn't in the Iliad."

McGuire says these are just a few examples of the issues the course will consider that are inherent in the making and use of historical film as a cultural mirror and culture maker.

"The course will consider many more," he says. "I guarantee that students will come away with a great deal of knowledge of the real and 'reel' [ancient Greece](#) and Rome, and the horror, splendor and weirdness that continues to gallop from the ancient rocks of the Mediterranean shores all the way to the Hollywood hills."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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