## CCIV 228: CLASSICAL ALLUSIONS IN FILM

Fall 2019

MW 2:50-4:10pm, DWNY113



## Course Description

This course surveys the influence of classical antiquity on Western filmmaking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with an emphasis on the ways in which filmmakers allude to and encounter classical themes, settings, characters, history, and literature in their works.

Films like *Gladiator* (2000) and *Troy* (2004) obviously adapt Classical material. But a wide variety of modern films explore Classics in a more subtle way. *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2001) lifts the *Odyssey* from Homer's Mediterranean world and drops it into Depression-era Southern America. *Chi-raq* resituates Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in gangravaged Chicago. *Logan* (2017) reimagines Vergil's *Aeneid*, while *Inception* provides a modern take on the ancient *katabasis*, or journey to the underworld, trope.

We will study these films and others to analyze the trajectory of classical allusion in modern film: why do directors continue to revisit classical antiquity? What themes are pervasive? How do ancient archetypes help characterize modern film characters? What is the difference between adaptation and inspiration? Why is classical antiquity still so compelling today? And how does watching these films affect our perceptions and interpretations of the source material?

Dr. Serena S. Witzke switzke@wesleyan.edu Downey House 211 Office Hours MW 1:30-2:30pm and by appointment



**CONTENT:** Students will read selections from Greek and Roman literary texts (in translation) in conjunction with weekly films; secondary readings will be drawn from ancient and contemporary criticism and theory, and students will have the opportunity to read some background material for many of these films. In class we will discuss these readings and view brief and longer segments from the film(s) assigned that week.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES:** By the end of the course you will be able to...

- 1) Identify classical allusions in popular films and understand the motives behind writers' and directors' choices.
- 2) See the symbolism in aligning characters within the broader contexts of classical mythology and history as a means of characterizing modern film characters.
- 3) Explain the difference between classical allusion, inspiration, and adaptation.
- 4) Re-examine your understanding of ancient material in light of modern interpretations.
- 5) Gain a more nuanced understanding of classical allusion in film beyond "what they got right/wrong."
- 6) Understand some techniques used in making films.

## GRADE BREAKDOWN:

Writing Prompts	40%
Film and Reading Quizzes	40%
Attendance & Participation	20%

**ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION:** Because this class is a discussion-based course, you must complete the readings before class and come prepared to talk about them. Only part of the day's class will be taken up by my lecturing and film viewing, and you will be expected to engage in thoughtful discussion with me and your classmates on the contents of those lectures and the readings assigned. Every class missed without a university-sanctioned excuse (band, sports, ROTC, doctor's note about a communicable illness) will result in the loss of 1pt from your final grade. Coming to class unprepared will result in the loss of 1/2pt from your final grade.

**WRITING PROMPTS:** Every other week students will write about the films in the unit and the ancient material and secondary sources read (this should be done on Moodle under assignments). I will post writing "prompts" to get you thinking. Each entry may consider what classical allusions were present in the film, how they were made, why the writers and directors may have chosen them, and how these allusions cause the viewer to rethink the ancient material from which they were drawn. Do you understand the ancient material better? Did the allusion bring out an aspect of the original material you never considered? Was the allusion a deliberate adaptation of ancient material, or was it indirectly inspired by the ancient material? Does this make a difference in your evaluation?

**FILM AND READING QUIZZES:** There will be regular quizzes about the content of the films, the ancient material readings, class discussion, and any assigned secondary material. These quizzes will test both your knowledge of factual information as well as your comprehension of more complex themes, allusions, and analysis.



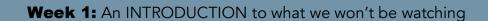
## **POLICIES**

- All students are expected to respect and follow the Student Honor Code: https://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/StudentHandbook.pdf
- 2. Excused late homework MUST be turned in within one week of the due date, otherwise it will not be accepted. Students must contact me in writing <u>before</u> missed quizzes to reschedule testing.
- 3. All reasonable accommodation will be given to students with disabilities. If you have a condition that may require accommodation, please contact the Accessibility Services (http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/disabilities/) as soon as possible.
- 4. The policy on grades, incompletes, withdrawals etc. is in strict accordance with official university policy (for which see the Registrar's website).
- 5. Electronic devices must be turned off and put away before class begins.
- 6. See me as soon as possible if you are having trouble. If my office hours aren't convenient, I will be happy to schedule a meeting time that works for you.

**NOTE ON FILMS:** Many of these films may include physical/sexual violence, sexual material, suicidal ideation, strong language, and political themes. If you are concerned about the content, please review the films listed on the syllabus and determine if this course is right for you.

**NOTE ON READINGS:** The readings will be posted each week on Moodle. Readings will consist of a primary source from antiquity (selections, or shorter works in their entirety) paired with at least one article about the film and its classical influences. You may also be asked to read articles from TVTropes, film reviews, or other materials.

**VIEWING THE FILMS:** Students are required to view the film(s) assigned before our Wednesday meeting. On Mondays we will discuss primary source material and introduce the week's film, as well as have a quiz (if applicable) on the previous week's material. On Wednesdays we will watch clips from the film, discuss secondary readings, and as a class consider the Classical allusions in the film, directors' choices, and film critiques. These films are widely available on Netflix and Amazon, as well as for rent, or for borrowing at Wesleyan's library, as well as the public library. If there is interest, I will host weekly film viewings in Downey House. If you have problems accessing or acquiring the film, let me know ASAP. No excuses will be accepted in class for failure to watch a film.



Sept. 2: The history of Classics in Film (swords, sandals, snooze)

Sept. 4: Oedipus, with Vegetables (Or, a lesson in reception)

Week 2 and 3: Classics and Comics: (Re)Action HEROES

Sept. 9, 11: Wonder Woman (2017) and the Amazons

Sept. 16,18: Hercules (2014) and the Hercules myth cycle

Week 4 and 5: EPIC Road Trips

Sept. 23, 25: O Brother, Where Art Thou (2000) and Homer's Odyssey

Sept. 30, Oct. 2: Logan (2017) and Vergil's Aeneid

**Week 6 and 7**: B\*\*\*\*\* be Crazy?

Oct. 7, 9: Chi-Raq (2015) and Aristophanes' Lysistrata

Oct. 14, 16: Gone Girl (2014) and Euripides' Medea

Week 8 and 9: Hell...Figuratively

Oct 23: Persepolis (2007) and Euripides' Trojan Women

Oct. 28, 30: The Conjuring (2013) and ancient hauntings

Week 10 and 11: Hell...Literally

Nov. 4, 6: Inception (2010) and katabasis tales

Nov. 11, 13: Pan's Labyrinth (2006) and Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Cupid and Psyche

Week 12, 13, 14: Love, Sex, and Control

Nov. 18, 20: Ruby Sparks (2012) and Ovid's Metamorphoses, Catullus, Hesiod

Nov. 25: 4 Months, 3 Weeks, & 2 Days (2007) and Augustus' Moral Legislation

Dec. 2, 4: Call Me By Your Name (2017) and Ancient Sexualities