classroom, to which this short overview cannot do justice. Above all, I hope to have provided some justification and encouragement for seeing cinema, and popular culture more generally, as something which should be worked with and used to our—and our students’—advantage, rather than fought against.


2 A report on the survey, and further resources relating to teaching classical receptions, will shortly be available on the CRSN website, http://www8.open.ac.uk/arts/research/crsn/.

3 Key works which are of particular use to undergraduates—and, in most cases, accessible to younger students too—are: M. Wyke (1997), Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History (London); J. Solomon (2001), The Ancient World in the Cinema (second edition, New Haven & London); M. Cyrino (2005), Big Screen Rome (Malden and Oxford); G. Nisbet (2008), Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture (second edition, Exeter); A. Blanshard & K. Shahabudin (2011), Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film (London). See also Martin Winkler’s edited collections on the films Troy, Spartacus, Gladiator, and The Fall of the Roman Empire.

4 To date, only the Cambridge Pre-U Classical Heritage syllabus contains an explicit reception focus, in its Paper 4.

5 There is also much to be gained from using films with which students are unlikely to be so familiar, as a way of demonstrating how different cultural traditions reconfigure antiquity differently. For example, a film like Pasolini’s Medea (1969) may not make for easy viewing, but short extracts will readily demonstrate how Hollywood’s vision of antiquity is not the only way of visualizing the past.

6 Exceptionally helpful resources relating to the ‘Storyboarding Virgilian Narrative’ assessment strategy, developed by Dr Lynn Fotheringham at the University of Nottingham, are available online at http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/classics/teaching-learning/modules/virgili.asp.

---

**Film in the Classics Classroom: Sixth Form Pupils’ Choices of Video-Clips to Illustrate Themes from Homer’s Iliad**

by Daniel Paul

---

**Introduction**

This study will examine the choices made by lower 6th pupils studying AS Classical Civilisation in response to the task of finding video clips that would illustrate themes in the Iliad. This research was designed to see what pupils chose to illustrate a theme in the Iliad in which they had an interest, as well as why they made that choice. It was also an exercise in seeing how they would react to each other’s clips and finally what they thought about the usage of video in the classroom currently.

The study was conducted at a selective independent school in Cambridge. The school is mixed (indeed this class who are the focus of this study had four boys and four girls in it) and has over 1000 pupils.

The class used in this study was an AS Classical Civilisation set with a range of ability within the class. Some of the written work from the pupils was consistent with A* level at AS, while some was more towards the B/C grades. Before embarking on this study I had taught the class for several weeks and it was clear that some were much more able to express themselves than others, both verbally and on paper. This was something which I had in mind when wanting to see whether some pupils might be able to better express themselves if prompted by a visual rather than written stimulus.

Not all the pupils had studied Classical Civilisation before this year and some had read the Iliad before whereas others had not. The class was preparing for the AQA Classical Civilisation paper which requires the pupils to have knowledge of most, but not all, of the books of the Iliad as well as several key themes, such as kleos, aristeia, family, love, fate and gods.

The class had been studying the Iliad since the beginning of the academic year and had finished reading through the prescribed sections of the text by around the end of February. It was at this point that I began to discuss what the overlying themes of the text were and to inform them about this study. I had some experience of using moving images to illustrate themes from my first placement school, where I had used moving images to illustrate kleos and aristeia with a Lower Sixth class studying the same prescriptions of the Iliad. I found that the pupils were responsive, engaged and engaging in response to short movie clips and wanted to see if this was an isolated case or if there was genuinely a pattern to the potential advantages of using video clips in lessons.

The students were set the task of finding movie clips of no more than five minutes in length which they thought would help them and their classmates better understand a concept in the Iliad. The themes chosen included:

- **kleos** - honour, fame, good reputation.
- **aristeia** - fighting prowess on the battlefield by an individual.
• love, both between family members and unmarried couples.
• the gods and goddesses in the Iliad.
• family values/the importance of family.
• omens and prophecy within the Iliad.

With this in mind I decided on the following research questions:

1) What do pupils say they value about watching video clips in class?
2) What do pupils think about the usage of film in education currently?
3) How did pupils appear to respond to the stimulus of watching video clips to illustrate themes in the Iliad?
4) What patterns of engagement / thinking / learning are manifest in the way pupils discussed video clips designed to illustrate themes in the Iliad?

I had witnessed teachers using video for a variety of reasons and I wanted to see what the pupils’ thoughts on the matter were. I had wondered about pupils viewing video as simply being a break from the lesson- watching a video is synonymous with mentally switching off and relaxing. This can be seen from verbal responses from pupils before the start of this study’s data collection process as well as the report by Burden and Kuechel which suggests that ‘Pupils may be highly motivated when they are involved in these activities without learning anything of real value’ (2004, cited by Bazalgette, 2009, p. 21). Therefore it would appear that the potential educational uses of video have not been as fully explored or exploited as they might have been.

My theory here was that pupils had to have something to do while watching a video, whether that was a worksheet that was filled in as the video played, or being given an overarching question to think about and come up with an answer to while watching the video. My observations while on placement at my Second Placement school and personal usage of these two approaches brought me to the conclusion that each is probably better at a different time: with a short clip it is better to have one thing to think about and then discuss afterwards. This means that pupils do not have to be constantly watching/ listening for the answer to the next question several times in a short space of time. However, with longer clips of five minutes or more in length, it seems more important that the pupils have something that keeps them focused throughout the video. Here my observations were that pupils were quite happy to watch longer clips provided that they had something to do, such as a worksheet that asked questions chronologically as the clip progressed. However, in cases where longer clips were shown and so such task was set, pupils commented that they thought it was less useful and that they were more prone mentally to ‘switch off’ as a result.

I also hoped to add some credence to the notion that video can be a way to understand the ancient world through a modern context. I believe that a visual stimulus, perhaps coupled with a written source, will create a better internalization of material and will generate a deeper level of thinking in class and in any written work on the topic that might follow the video.

|Findings and analysis|

Based on my interviews and questionnaire responses from six of the pupils in this Lower Sixth Classical Civilisation set, I will present my findings under five headings:

1) How do pupils think the usage of video can help with understanding a topic? This will give an indication as to what the pupils’ views are on how, or whether, video can be useful. This corresponds to Research Question 3 in the introduction.

2) Are there any points of caution regarding the usage of video in lesson?

Here it is worth noting that several pupils had caveats to present regarding the usage of videos in lessons. This corresponds to Research Question 2 in the introduction.

3) Do you think that video is used well in education currently? This will give some information regarding whether pupils perceive that any improvements could be made in the usage of video in the classroom currently. This corresponds to Research Question 2 in the introduction.

4) Why did pupils choose their particular clips? This will hopefully allow some understanding of what pupils want to see in videos in class. This corresponds to Research Question 1 in the introduction.

5) How has this exercise broadened pupils’ understanding of the particular topic? This should give some insight regarding how video can be useful specifically for understanding classical texts, such as the Iliad. This corresponds to Research Question 4 in the introduction.

It is worth noting at this point the clips chosen by each pupil individually. Each pupil was given a theme in the Iliad for which they had to find a clip no longer than five minutes:

Pupil 1 chose family values, and the video was a TV advert for Monster.

Pupil 2 chose kleos (honour or glory on the battlefield), and the video was from Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers.

Pupil 3 chose the gods, and the video was from Clash of the Titans.

Pupil 4 chose fate/ prophecy, and the video was from Harry Potter and Prisoner of Azkaban.

Pupil 5 chose aristeia (individual excellence in battle), and the video was from 300.

Pupil 6 chose love, and the video was from Titanic.
Q1) How do you think the use of video can help with understanding a topic?

The main theme in responses to this question, both written and verbal, was that video can be a great alternative to reading and writing. All six of the pupils interviewed mentioned this at some point in their responses,

‘You can see things in another way, it can be easier to understand a visual image, video shows things that could not be put across using a board and pen’ (pupil 1).

The pupils appeared to acknowledge that different learning styles should be catered for in a lesson and that video was a good tool for this end:

‘People learn in different ways; looking at an image commits something to memory more than seeing it on a sheet’ (pupil 2).

‘Your imagination is stimulated more than it would be by a written message’ (pupil 3).

‘[it is] good to get a visual image of the written word’ (pupil 6).

This would indicate that pupils’ understanding can be greatly enhanced by the usage of video in lessons, and that ideas can be developed in greater depth if there is a visual stimulus provided. Again all the pupils mentioned at some point that a video will maintain and enhance interest in a subject greatly. That is not to say, judging from their responses, that video should supersede textbooks and the written word, but rather that it should be used in conjunction with them:

‘Reading and books can become tedious’ (pupil 4).

‘Video makes a change from reading and allows a deeper level of understanding’ (pupil 6).

Another fairly common theme in response to this question is that video commits things to memory better than just the written word. It allows a clear visualisation of a particular theme, episode, key word or phrase, which in turn makes these issues ‘more memorable in the long term’ (pupil 1). It was specifically acknowledged by three interviewees that having a mental image of particular scenes makes most episodes easier to remember and allows the pupils to visualize what they have read much more clearly, even in cases where the video was not from a classically themed source (pupils 1, 4 and 6). This tallies with the evidence of Marcus et al (2009, p159) that film is an excellent way to help pupils visualise the events and people that they are studying.

Other themes that were raised by some pupils, but not as commonly as these first two themes, included: Video being contemporary: it makes aspects of a topic more relatable (pupil 1), and is a good way to connect with a generation who are growing up with TV and internet (pupil 4); it’s a more fun, more modern representation of the ancient world (pupil 6).

Video was believed to have a positive effect on the structure of a lesson:

‘It breaks up the lesson’ (pupil 4).

‘Video helps with the flow of the lesson and makes what comes afterwards more effective’ (pupil 6).

Video is suggested by the pupils as allowing you to see other people’s perspectives: Here some pupils said that they thought video gave a better insight into how their classmates were viewing particular episodes or themes in the Iliad:

‘Video allows you to see other people’s perspectives, especially if the class choose their own clips’ (pupil 1).

‘You can better understand other people’s perspectives’ (pupil 3).

Q2) Are there any points of caution you can think of regarding the usage of video in lessons?

The main caveat, raised by all six pupils at one point or another, was that videos can often be irrelevant. The pupils emphasized how the effectiveness of a video is principally dictated by its relevance and that if the connections between the video and topic in question were not obvious, the video would not be as helpful as it could be.

‘It has to be clearly related to the topic, subtle themes could cause confusion…the message must be clear and obvious to all’ (pupil 2).

‘A video may not be accurate enough to illustrate the different themes in question… videos that show inaccurate information can be confusing’ (pupil 3).

‘The video must be relatable to all pupils’ (pupil 4).

‘It must be appropriate to the subject and must be appropriate for the audience’ (pupil 5).

‘[Video] clips must be refined so that they are clearly relevant to the topic at hand, clips can be shown for amusement rather than education’ (pupil 6).

The main problem resulting from this, and again something that all pupils mentioned at some point, was that video can be a time to switch off, and in particular if the video is not clearly relevant or is too long. All six interviewees said that length is a key issue and that after a certain period of time, if there is no break for analysis or answering questions (written or verbal), pupils’ attention can easily wander. Pupil 5 specifically said that any video over five minutes in length should either be paused to allow time for discussion or should have some form of accompanying worksheet in order to maintain pupil focus.
Again there were some issues raised that were not common to all the interviewees but that I feel are relevant to my research. Video should not be used as an alternative to teaching; some pupils mentioned times where they felt that the teacher had showed a video, sometimes a very long video, in order to have a lesson off. The video, they felt, had been used as a distraction and had not been clearly linked to the topic for that lesson, thus not fostering any further learning on the topic.

Q3) Do you think that video is used well in education currently? Please give reasons for your answer.

The underlying tone of the responses, though in the majority of cases not made explicit by the pupils, was that video had the potential to be a good educational tool, but that it was not necessarily being fully utilised at that stage yet. All the pupils’ responses to this question were dominated by their discussion of the caveats regarding video in the classroom. This might lead to the assumption that, in their opinion, video usage can and should be improved. I will not repeat the main points of caution that were raised by the pupils in answer to Q2 but it is worth emphasizing that the pupils’ responses were more full of caution than praise. In particular all the pupils said that many videos at the moment are not obviously relevant and most said that longer videos do not incorporate enough discussion and subsequent analysis. Also, the pupils mentioned again here that several teachers or subjects have, in their experience, used videos ‘just for the sake of it’ and that this is just a waste of time and has little or no educational value.

However, all of the pupils at some point also mentioned that video has been used well in many cases and that, with one exception, they would like to see it used more in the future. ‘It engages me more than whiteboard work… I think it’s exciting to watch videos’ (pupil 1); ‘It may spark interest in the subject, also it may inspire students to do further reading on a subject after seeing a video clip… especially since kids now respond better to video and internet than books’ (pupil 3); and ‘Video highlights links that you might not otherwise think of and could be used more’ (pupil 4).

Q4) Why did you choose your particular clip?

Here the main theme in the responses tallied with what the pupils thought were the priorities for the usage of video in the classroom. That is, they chose the clips because they were relevant and obvious to the theme, because it was from a contemporary source for which they had a personal liking and because it would help to provide a good visual stimulus for the topic in question.

All the pupils said that they had been keen to find something that clearly illustrated their chosen theme: ‘It tied in with the theme of family life’ (pupil 1); ‘It was something easily transposed on to the Iliad’ (pupil 2); ‘It allows better visualisation of the gods and represented Olympus well’ (pupil 3); ‘It represents links with prophecy and fate in the Iliad’ (pupil 4); ‘It demonstrates some of the key ideals / features in a hero’s aristeia’ (pupil 5); ‘It links up well with the different types of love in the Iliad’ (pupil 6).

Other responses which tied in with pupil responses to earlier question are worth mentioning too: Two pupils mentioned that they had chosen their clips because they wanted to generate excitement, which in turn would hopefully make their clip more memorable. Four of the interviewees specifically said that they had chosen their clip because it came from a source for which they had a personal liking. Three said that they had chosen their clips because they wanted them to be contemporary and relatable for a modern audience. It is worth noting here that not all the pupils were successful in their wishes to present relatable materials – some pupils chose clips from movies that other members of the class had not seen and therefore could not relate to the clips as much as was intended, or required a lot of context in order to get the most out of the clip shown.

Q5) How has this exercise broadened your understanding of the particular topic?

Here I feel that it is useful to look at the pupils’ responses by video topic. The responses to each video were slightly different and reveal different ways in which video can be useful and effective in the classroom. The comments after each video come from both the pupil who chose the video as well as the other members of the class immediately after watching the clip.

Reactions after the viewing of pupil 1’s clip (TV advert for Monster) included:

‘This helps me to visualize the topic more, and picture images for Thetis looking out for Achilles, or Hector looking out for his son. It makes me understand more about the problems of a child not having a guiding light or father figure, and allows a greater understanding of how some children will never reach their potential like Astyanax.’ (pupil 4).

In particular with the last point this is a good example of how the pupils can come up with ideas and interpretations beyond my own.

Reactions after the viewing of pupil 2’s clip (The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers) included:

‘It has shown how some modern stories can take inspiration from classical texts such as the Iliad, it also help you to remember a particular scene if you have a visual representation, for example Thoden being cocky but not actually getting involved in fighting calls to mind Agamemnon in book 2, the trickery of taking Troy is similar to the deceit of the explosion at the wall.’ (pupil 5).

Again it was interesting to see how the pupils mentioned things that I had not considered. However, this video also highlighted how the pupils missed several points that I thought had been
more obvious, such as the fact that the fight takes place outside huge walls, the clashing of armies results in lots of people not actually fighting and lots of different things going on simultaneously on the battlefield but the Iliad (and the movie) can only focus on one thing at a time.

Reactions after the viewing of pupil 3’s clip (Clash of the Titans) included:

“This was a great help for envisaging and thinking about how certain supernatural aspects of the Iliad (i.e. the gods) might be portrayed; it gives a clear mental image of how a god may be associated with different attributes; it showed how the gods in the Iliad must be worshipped and respected, not only by humans but also by each other; gods are not allowed to intervene sometimes and fate must be sacrosanct; the gods are very human in that they squabble with each-other; the gods can be made vulnerable by humans’ lack of attention; they take great interest in mortal affairs.’ (pupil 1).

In general the pupils agreed that the gods had been one of the more difficult aspects of the Iliad to visualise and that having a clear mental image of them was very useful. Furthermore it allowed deeper understanding of certain key episodes, such as Zeus not saving Sarpedon, Zeus forbidding the other gods to get involved in the combat, and Hector’s fate being weighed in the scales and the result of this being unchangeable.

Reactions after the viewing of pupil 4’s clip (Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban) included:

“It is very helpful to have a class discussion after a clip so that class can come up with ideas not thought of by the author as well as finding out what the author’s intentions were; it illustrates, in a modern and relatable way, the importance of symbolism, the complications of interpretation and the power of omens; it helps to get different people’s viewpoints and interpretations.’ (pupil 3).

Here the clip revealed how different some pupils’ mental images of the text were very different from others’. The pupils agreed that this exchange of views was very useful for broadening their own perspectives. As such we can see how the breadth of potential interpretations can be a very good thing for the pupils when a video is subjective as opposed to purely information-based.

Reactions after the viewing of pupil 5’s clip (300) included:

“It demonstrates the qualities of aristeia visually and makes the events in the Iliad more real; shows clearly the complete domination of a single man over many; it adds a different perspective to an ‘older’ topic’. (pupil 6).

In the main the reactions to this clip were that, again, it allowed better visualisation but also the fact that it was contemporary made it useful. The clip’s author in particular emphasized how he thought that videos used in class were often dated and this made them less relatable for pupils.

Reactions after the viewing of pupil 6’s clip (Titanic) included:

“This clip allows better and clearer recollection of key episodes and themes; it shows a modern spin on the separation between families with fathers leaving sons as the Titanic is abandoned just like Hector and Astyanax; the idea of love rivals such as Paris and Menelaus is similar to Jack and Rose’s husband; the resentment of separation is just like Achilles and Briseis; the clinging to a loved one despite the pressure for departure is similar to Hector and Andromache in book 6; Rose goes back for Jack just like Hector does with his family; the line ‘I always win, Jack’ is very reminiscent of heroic arrogance or hubris.’ (pupil 2).

Here the most revealing thing was the amount of information the pupils managed to get out of the clip. Granted, this clip was the longest of the six (just under four minutes long) but this may still indicate that longer clips, up to a point, can be more beneficial than very short ones (one or two minutes in length, as most of the clips were). It also illustrates how a contemporary source that is not classical by nature can induce a greater depth and breadth of ideas than a classical one. For example the clip from 300 did not promote anywhere near as much discussion as this clip, despite being quite relevant to the author’s chosen theme.

Conclusions

Before presenting my conclusions and evaluation of this research I would like to acknowledge its limitations. This research has been carried out only with one class at one school and the reactions of the pupils involved should not be taken as necessarily indicative of what all pupils would say. This research could be expanded on if someone were to do a study of how different age groups react to this exercise of choosing their own clips to illustrate themes in a text. Also it might be worth looking into the different views and reactions of pupils regarding the usage of video in schools of a different background to the one in which this research took place.

Another angle of further study might be to consider the difference between the impact of moving images and still images. In Classics in particular we base a lot of study on our interpretation of stills, such as when studying ancient architecture or Greek vases or mosaics. It could of some use to find out whether pupils can get more or less or different benefits from fixed images rather than video clips.

Also, this research has not placed too much emphasis on the usage of clips from very classical sources as opposed to contemporary sources. For example, the clips used by the pupils came in part from classically themed films such as 300 or Clash of the Titans, but also from non-classical sources such as Titanic and Harry Potter. It may be worth examining pupil preferences as well as educational effects of using classical and non-classical sources when watching video clips.

That said, the pupils confirmed several of my hypotheses:
• Students want to see videos that are modern to bridge school and social life— a video that is contemporary will often have a better effect than something older.

• Students want the videos they watch to be obviously relevant— a video that is too subtle in its connection with a topic can be more confusing than helpful.

• Video gives them an alternative way to visualise what is going on in the text.

• Video can be misused if it is too long or does not have an obvious purpose— the pupils repeatedly emphasised the importance of length and relevance.

• It is best to have something to be thinking about or doing while watching a longer video (perhaps, anything more than five minutes?) such as a worksheet, or else it is useful to work breaks into longer videos.

• It is a good way to break up a lesson.

• Videos chosen by students MUST be checked first by the teacher (this was borne through by the fact that one pupil chose a clip which was not appropriate for the topic or audience in question).

However, there were also some things that I thought would be issues for the pupils that were not mentioned by them in their responses. For example, I had thought that there would be a difference of opinion about when in the lesson one uses a video. However, the pupils thought that the more important issues were the quality, relevance, length and age of the video. That is not to say that they didn’t have an opinion on the matter, but rather that it was not at the forefront of their minds during our class discussions or the individual interviews.

The pupils also raised some issues that I had not considered before my research:

• A non-classical clip can induce a lot more discussion and analysis than a classical one sometimes can.

• Video is a good way for pupils to share and contrast their ideas and this in turn is something they view as a useful and broadening experience.

• Video can be viewed as a time to switch off in class, particularly if it seems that the video is being used as a time-filler or an alternative to teaching and learning.

• Teachers and pupils can often have very different interpretations of a clip; it is important to keep an open mind and expect the unexpected.

• Video is a particularly good way to help students memorise key episodes.

• Video is a useful tool for expanding on themes or episodes that it might be difficult for pupils to imagine, such as the gods in the Iliad.

Overall I would say that this research should encourage the greater usage of video in the classroom provided that certain criteria are met. Discussions with the pupils make it clear that there are many caveats regarding the usage of video in the classroom but also that when video clips are used correctly it can be highly beneficial for those involved. Video provides an alternative method of interpretation and can illustrate a topic in such a way that the written or spoken word cannot. It also, in cases where the clips have been chosen by the pupils, encourages them to research a topic outside the classroom and beyond the syllabus. The reaction to the task of having to find movie clips to illustrate Homeric themes was very well received and the pupils appeared to have put a reasonable amount of thought into what clips they chose. I would argue that the pupils got more out of this experience than they would have done if I had chosen the clips and in fact one of the pupils said that they thought that the experience would have been even more beneficial if they had each chosen a clip for each theme. Again, this may be an area for future researchers to examine in order to expand on my results.

References


The clips mentioned can be found at the following URLs:

Love (Titanic) www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwfwmo8BJXkw

Aristeia (300) www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqXLKMmTR4M&feature=related

The Gods ( Clash of the Titans) www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7eRPc8lOt0

Fate / Prophecy (Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban) www.youtube.com/watch?v=NidLa9yYiw

Family Life (Advert for Monster) www.youtube.com/watch?v=eo5lwYysbg&feature=related

Kleos (Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers) www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1jg0kJmYMPw&list=FLsrwhoi4SmbN

GA4H14A6i A&index=2&feature=plpp_video

Daniel Paul is a Classics teacher in an independent school in the North of England.