Anyone with a finger on the pulse of Classical Studies in the modern world will recognise the extent to which cinema shapes, maintains, and (on some views) distorts interest in our discipline, from both an educational and a broader cultural perspective. Like it or not, many people will first (and perhaps only) encounter classical mythology through films like Troy (2004) or Clash of the Titans (2010), or will always envision Rome through the brutally glamorous lens of Hollywood productions from Ben-Hur (1959) to Gladiator (2000). As professional scholars and educators in Classics, we know that the movies can be a powerful gateway drug, enticing students into the classrooms and lecture-halls of a subject which, for more than a century, has had cause to feel beleaguered and under threat, and which yet can use continuing popular interest in antiquity to bolster its cause. Cinema was a recruitment tool for Classics from its very earliest days, with one journal’s editorial in 1915 arguing that ‘Moving pictures are an excellent means of showing that the Classics are not dead. […] An institution [cinema] which seems to some only an evil may be turned into useful channels’; and a quick glance at the prospectus webpages of many a school and university will show how readily we employ the same rhetoric today.

This is all to the good: it would be foolish not to recognise and exploit the paths by which many of us first meet antiquity in order to encourage others down the same path. But it would also be foolish to underexploit the critical and intellectual applications of those paths. Dangling in front of students photos of whichever Hollywood pin-up has most recently donned a sword and sandals, only to whisk them away once bums are safely on seats, means losing a wealth of opportunities to enhance and update the study of the classical world. Cinematic versions of antiquity – and, by extension, many other popular receptions of the ancient world – are already familiar to our students and, with the right preparation and thought, can be used effectively and productively, supplementing and deepening students’ engagement with ancient material. Good examples of this kind of pedagogical practice already abound, in schools as well as universities. This short article therefore aims to present an overview of potentially useful strategies, and the thinking behind them, in the hope that this will engender new debates and ideas in the ongoing development of Classical Studies and its day-to-day delivery in the classroom.

**Classical reception studies — some background.**

The case for integrating cinema into the Classical Studies classroom is best made against the backdrop of the explosion of scholarly interest in classical receptions in recent years. Studies of the modern world’s engagement with antiquity are now a serious (if not always absolutely mainstream) aspect of research in universities and beyond, evidenced by the ever-increasing number of publications in this field, such as Oxford University Press’s Classical Presences series, and its new Classical Receptions Journal. This scholarly activity has been matched by a considerable growth in reception studies within university undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. The Classical Reception Studies Network (CRSN) has recently been exploring the teaching of reception in the UK in some depth, and a survey of Classics and Ancient History departments showed just how widespread reception is in our universities: over 40 standalone reception modules are currently offered, with as many again integrating classical receptions with more conventional topics of study.

Most strikingly, the survey showed that approximately one in four of those standalone reception modules focused on the ancient world in the cinema, and that if departments were to offer only one reception module, then it was very likely to be a film-based one. Clearly, cinema has been at the vanguard of classical reception’s expansion in universities, and a number of factors lie behind this. As already noted, the appeal and accessibility of ancient world films typically guarantees both high enrolments for such modules, and student familiarity with much of the material; and since 2000, a steady stream of new productions has refreshed the syllabus, and ensured its currency and topicality. Moreover, innovative teaching and module design has demonstrated that far from being mere recruitment tools, ‘Classics and Film’ modules are intellectually challenging. Whether addressing historical films, adaptations of ancient literature, or the numerous other ways in which a relationship between past and present is forged on screen, cinematic receptions of antiquity now play a significant role in the Classical Studies curriculum, well supported by an increasing list of relevant publications.

**Cinematic receptions in the school curriculum.**

With a firm footing in undergraduate programmes, then, how might such approaches also play a role in Classical Studies in schools? Are there opportunities to embed this kind of material more firmly in classroom activities, or is it best left to the extra-curricular Classics Clubs in which it already appears in many places? A full and frank answer to such questions must, of course, take account of the many practical (and ideological) factors which might impinge here, not least of which are pressures on resources. With limited classroom time in which
to address the GCSE, AS or A level syllabus, how much scope is there for pursuing new pathways? Debates over reception's role in the formal curricula of classical subjects must be left to one side, though; for now, let us imagine an ideal world in which no such obstacles to integrating Classics and cinema exist. What, then, might be done to make the most of such opportunities?

There are, I would suggest, two broad (and overlapping) approaches to using cinema in the Classical Studies classroom: discussing and studying it for its own sake, and using it in a more instrumental way. The first is the one that might provoke most unease, but it is also the method which is most likely to pay dividends in terms of engendering and enhancing students’ critical thinking skills. The unease comes from the fact that a film like Troy is easy to dismiss and disdain, whether for its questionable relationship to Homeric epic, its dubious version of early Greek visual culture, or simply the fact that, for many audiences, it’s not a very good film; similar objections might be raised against most comparable Hollywood epics. Consequently, teachers may feel that all such films do is embed inaccuracies and misinterpretations in students’ minds, which need to be cleared away before ‘proper’ appreciation of, say, Homeric epic can happen.

But this misses the point. While listing the faults of Troy, 300, or Gladiator can be an interesting starting point, it doesn’t get us very far; the real intellectual value lies in discussing why these films get things ‘wrong’; and what does ‘wrong’ mean, in the context of Classical Studies, anyway? Once students are encouraged to think critically about the decision to have Agamemnon die at Troy, or the depiction of the Persian army as a monstrous, supernaturally horde, then we open up for them a whole array of questions that go to the very heart of our subject’s methods and meanings in the modern world, taking them from an assessment of the flaws in our knowledge of the past, through an understanding of myth’s mutability, and an appreciation of antiquity’s ideological applications, to the simple fact that the classical world is hard to pin down and, moreover, that it means different things at different times. This is not to say that a study of classical material on its own terms cannot engender such insights; but it is modern receptions like these films that crystallise these debates in the most accessible, productive ways, and which direct students to think critically and reflectively about the different ways in which we access the ancient past.

The second approach is perhaps more pragmatic, involving exploiting film for its instrumental value, and using it as a tool which can help to shed light on key features of specification texts – or indeed any other aspect of antiquity being studied – in an innovative, engaging way. This approach does not deny the value of cinematic receptions in and of themselves, and critical reflection on the cinematic texts remains a key learning outcome (as does an awareness that one of reception’s major uses for classicists, as a methodology, is its ability to help us look at ancient texts and artefacts in a new light); but it is also a pedagogical strategy which dovetails more easily with a syllabus’s existing requirements, by using key films, or parts of films, in a more focused way. Two examples of classroom (and/or assessment activities) that have proved effective in my own teaching lend themselves particularly well to the study of classical epic, but could also be adapted to other material. The first centres around a short piece of text – perhaps a key episode in Odysseus’ wanderings – and asks students to consider how they would go about filming it. Students can present their plan verbally, in writing, or even pictorially, but the key objective is to look at the original text with new eyes: for in contemplating the process of telling a story in a new medium, the devices and techniques inherent to the original often come to the fore in particularly vivid ways. For example, how would the long speeches of Homeric characters be brought to life on screen? How do we visualise the gods? And what about the liberal use of simile and metaphor in Homer? Can this be rendered either visually, or in a character’s dialogue, and does it matter if we omit them? The learning outcomes here coalesce around a deeper, perhaps different, understanding of the ancient text itself, rather than drawing conclusions on cinema per se; but in discussion and presentation of these critical and creative ideas, new insight into both ancient and modern storytelling techniques are likely to intertwine.

A second approach utilises students’ broader experience of contemporary cinema, perhaps departing from ancient world films themselves, and focuses attention on the deeper themes of the text under consideration. In this exercise, most usefully conducted as a classroom discussion, participants are directed to consider the extent to which modern films might function as equivalents to ancient epic texts (but also conceivably tragedies, or even comedies) by addressing the same themes – particularly those relating to heroism, martial valour, or the individual’s role within the community. Such a proposition readily invites discussion of a whole host of recent mainstream film-making, most obviously the flourishing genre of superhero films, including 2012’s Avengers, Spiderman, and Batman franchise instalments, but also war films, or modern takes on classical mythology, such as Clash of the Titans (2010) and Wrath of the Titans (2012). Other popular recent films, most notably The Hunger Games (2012), might help steer discussion beyond the themes of literature, into a discussion of the modern world’s on-going fascination with violent entertainment, providing useful comparative material to a study of Roman spectacle and display.

The suggestions offered in these very brief outlines will, I hope, be taken as a springboard for further innovation in pedagogical methods – and perhaps for wider sharing of ideas that have already been put into practice – since there are undoubtedly many, many more ways in which cinema can usefully be employed in the Classical Studies.
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.

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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 will, in most cases, be 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 (2003), 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 Literature 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 Parolini’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/virgил.aspx.

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.