

300 and Fellini-Satyricon: Film Theory in the Tertiary Classroom

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Table of Contents

- Editorial**
- Popular Culture Studies**
Scholarship into the Future
Lynne Chapman King and Anna Cohen-Miller
- Guest Editorial**
- "*καλό δὲν ἔμπροσθεν βίου κέρτερον*":
Architecture as a Pedagogical Lens on Greek Roman Antiquity
Katerin Day and Benjamin Hill
- Part I: Epic Reconsiderations**
- Wounds That Will Not Heal: Herodion and Innocence in Shakespeare and the *Ilad**
Carl A. Rubino
- O Homer, Where Art Thou?: Teaching the *Ilad* and the *Odysssey* through Popular Culture*
Malory Young
- The Odyssey and Its Odyssey in Contemporary Texts: Re-Visions in Star Trek, The Time Traveller's Wife, and the *Panopticon**
Mary Economou Bailey Green
- Part II: Reception and Re-narrations**
- Thessos Loses His Way: Viktor Pavlovich's *Memor of Horror* and the Old Latvian Myth of the New World*
Alison Traxwell
- 300 and Fellini-Satyricon: Film Theory in the Tertiary Classroom*
Leanne Glass
- Part III: Gender in Cinematic Narratives**
- The Labyrinth of Memory: *Spigenola, Simónides*, and Classical Models of Architecture as Metaphor in Chris Nolan's *Inception* (2010)*
Bergoin Heller
- Ovid and Mel Gibson: Power, Vulnerability, and What Women Want*
Caiti Bawelwell
- Experiments in Love: *Verano*, *Daphnia* and *Chloe* and Henry de Langens' *Panopticon* and *The Blue Lagoon**
Kristen Day
- Part IV: Reviews**
- Graphic Novel Review – The Adventures of Johnny Bravo: The Last Career Guide*
You'U Ever Need
Robert G. Weiner
- Video Game Review – Final Fantasy XIV: Level Up Forever*
Brian Cowhaver

Abstract: Pedagogical practices in Reception-based courses on ancient Greece and Rome in film often focus on an individual film's connections to its historical themes and meta-narrative. In contrast, courses based on Film Studies often focus pedagogical discussions on filmic techniques or the filmmaking process *per se*. Regularly, the two approaches remain discrete and discipline-based.

In view of this disjuncture in teaching approaches and foci, the intention of this paper is to explore the benefits of film theory, including its consideration of film technique, within Classical Reception courses. Therefore, the suggestion offered herein is that more emphasis on the pedagogies of Film Studies would provide an enhanced and richer understanding of cinematic interpretations and possibilities for the student of Classical Reception and film.

To illustrate this pedagogical suggestion, a discussion of mainstream Hollywood-style cinema as depicted by Zack Snyder's *300* (2007), in contrast to the independent auteur-driven film, Federico Fellini's *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969), is the focus. These two films provide the tertiary instructor with a variety of theoretical and technical considerations that are important learning components in a course on ancient Greece and Rome and which are rarely available in the more popularized approaches to the subject. This paper will also introduce students to topics such as art-house and Hollywood studio filmmaking, which further introduces subjects such as "high art" versus popular culture.

Additionally, focusing on two different styles of filmmaking and including an acknowledgment of each filmmaker's aesthetic enables the tertiary instructor to explore other fields of enquiry that offer broader cultural issues such as class, race, gender, and sexuality. This, in turn, allows for a more informed interaction on specific cultural themes between the ancient and modern worlds as interpreted by the filmmakers.

I. Introduction

Films based on ancient Greece and Rome may be frequently divided into two categories: popular entertainment such as William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), Stanley Kubrick's *Spartan's 300* (2007) and Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), and art-house films, such as Jean Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (Contempt) (1963) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (1969). In Classical Reception courses, both concepts of filmmaking are usually treated but are often discussed in relation to subject matter only and their connections and disconnections to antiquity. Therefore, as a means of considering the inclusion of both styles in the classroom and as a way of underlining the importance of film theory for students, a discussion of Zack Snyder's *300* (2007) and Federico Fellini's *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969) forms the basis of this article.

This article introduces two main benefits: firstly, teaching these films opens dialogue on the role of the auteur, which is one of the most debatable issues in film and media studies, with the generally accepted view that a film should not be attributed to one person but is a collaborative effort. Additionally, these two films demonstrate to students the validity of both mainstream cinema and auteur-based or art-house films, leading to discussions of the ways in which a filmmaker's input should be evaluated on an individual basis.

While Snyder's *300* objectively replicates the graphic novel on which it is based to meet popular and commercial expectations, *Fellini-Satyricon*, as a film that is indelicately stamped with Fellini's name, is the result of Fellini's unique interpretation of the ancient Roman world and does not meet the expectations of the commercial, instructor or able to provide students with a solid foundation to differentiate between various cinematic genres and artistic readings of ancient Greece and Rome and are equally valuable contributors to tertiary courses.

Additionally, acknowledging Snyder and Fellini's disparate modes of filmmaking opens broader cultural themes within each film's narrative, including class, race, gender, and sexuality. This permits a more thorough understanding of each filmmaker's aesthetic interpretation of the ancient world and the ways their incorporation of different themes connect with modern concerns, which is a key component of Classical Reception studies.

II. Pedagogical and Scholarly Approaches to Ancient Greece and Rome in Film

Present teaching focuses on the historical film's interpretation from social, cultural, mythic and/or factual bases, but little emphasis is placed upon the diversity of its cinematic genres that, for instance, can include mainstream, Hollywood-style cinema, art-house, and even theatrical re-enactments. To exemplify this wide range, in his early study of Greek tragedy into film, Kenneth MacKinnon classified this ancient theatrical field into four cinematic categories: "theatrical, realistic and filmic modes, and meta-tragedy" (19: 30). This shows that even within one historically-based dramatic or literary field, cinematic interpretations can vary greatly and are reflections of different styles in filmmaking. The effect of these varying techniques as outlined differs from readings of one ancient source, but they do have a significant impact on the way the audience perceives the story. For example, in *Passion* (1978). Both are mainly derived from the ancient tragedy of Euripides' *Medea*, yet Ferraresi Pasolini's film falls within the art-house format, Dassin's *Passion* is a modern re-interpretation that is indicative of cinema's mainstream formula, highlighting the cinematic variations that can be adopted based on the same subject matter.

Classroom discussions of cinematic interpretations of antiquity also need to extend to a consideration of the objectives of filmmakers *per se*, including the topic of the auteur (discussed below). Filmmakers' aims include molding a film to suit individually-perceived notions of historical models, which is qualified by the statement of Ridley Scott, the director of *Gladiator*: "We needed to revisit this world without it being a history lesson and to interpret these historical figures in a way that made sense to audiences today. Filmmaking 40 years ago tended to treat these subjects with a neutrality that wouldn't be appropriate now" (Lindsay 8). In light of such observations, the director's artistic vision over that of the producer is a more important interpretive consideration.

Combined, the issues discussed above advocate for a consideration of film principles when teaching ancient Greece and Rome in film. By acknowledging styles, production considerations, and directorial intention, an instructor is able to provide students with a solid foundation to differentiate between various cinematic genres and filmmaking techniques. This then extends to the benefits of providing students with important cinematic terminology.

The issues raised so far are important in view of the scholarly texts available to students enrolled in such courses. In his study of film that is similarly equipped with comic-book elements, Andrew Sariss writes in *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film*. Astarik Ribshahard and Kim Shahabuddin state: "One should be wary of the fallacy of 'auteurism,' the tendency to attribute every aspect back to the director" (9). Additionally, in the innovative and highly influential *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, Maria Wyke asserts that a film's production crew act as a microcosm of society, thereby injecting their socio-historical voice into the meta-narrative of the film (24). Both texts, therefore, question the reality of the auteur and, in order for students to interact with these scholarly positions, indeed to question them, they should ideally be aware of alternative arguments as well as theoretical perspectives with which to engage with such texts.

In fact, a formulation of authorship in film is re-emerging in new interpretive approaches that take into consideration the filmmaker's historical and cultural backgrounds in relation to the film under consideration (Ford 104), a development which parallels an approach in historicalism (Villarejo 58). This perspective introduces the concept of auteurship as a form of historicism and is influenced by the film and media scholar Paul Watson, who seeks a pragmatic concept of cinematic auteurship (165-157). Watson states "I'm not precisely, like the approach one employs should be determined on a case-by-case basis in relation to the specifics of the research question" (156). To clarify his case further, Watson explains "I use it here, however, to suggest a model of analysis which starts asking the question 'Do authors exist?' and starts from such questions as 'Is it useful to say this or that film as if it were the product of a creative agency?' or 'Might it be useful to study it as though or that person as if they were an author?'" (156).

Adopting this individual and logical approach in Classical Reception Studies creates the foundation for a more informed methodological process that sets the distinction between a mainstream or auteur-inspired film, allows for specific sub-genre classifications such as epic, fantasy, or art-house; and, in turn, takes into consideration the manner in which any of these aspects feed into the film's narrativized. This approach naturally melds with the traditional pedagogical practices of Classical Reception Studies, which are often taught by the auteurist approach, but with popular themes and technological advances, such as Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) or 3D special effects. Nor are they bound to the tenets of one particular genre or filmmaking principle, which can result in blurring the lines between, for instance, mass audience appeal and art-house. Filmmaking is a constantly changing creative process and, as such, studies in Classical Reception need to recognize and adapt, where appropriate, to its changing edicts.

To clarify some of the advantages of an individual approach towards filmmaking, a brief exploration of Snyder's *300* followed by Fellini's *Fellini-Satyricon* which, on the surface, are two seemingly disparate films, will provide a basic model for further consideration in this developing academic field.

III. Snyder – The Comic Book and the Blockbuster

The plot of Snyder's *300*, involving an elite group of Spartans who, led by King Leonidas, faces King Xerxes' Persian army in the narrow pass at Thermopylae in 480 BCE for the protection of all Greece, is a loose translation of historical accounts. Yet its actual origins as a comic book series and later graphic novel by Frank Miller positions *300* within several sub-genres: literary, historical, epic, and fantasy.

As a young boy, Miller was inspired by the story of the battle at Thermopylae after watching Rudolph Maté's *The 300 Spartans* (1962), a story that remained with him until its recreation as a work of both history and fiction in his comic book series. This fictional aspect can be seen, for instance, in *300*'s emphasis on larger-than-life characters (almost supernatural in their representation), extreme dramatic overtures, and a specific focus on strong, powerful messages such as honor, duty, and glory, which are features of the comic book genre and are particularly evident in the film's historical or military rhetoric. These multi-faceted layers of *300*'s historical and literary conception align with its modern American sub-cultural ideologies highlighting its ability to appeal to a wide audience. However, *300*'s most significant attraction, as exemplified by Miller's boyhood memories, is its inspiring storyline that is based on actual events. The spectator can connect with this film, at its basic historical level, as an example of human courage and honor. Regardless of the comic book's supernatural elements, which are then transformed into Snyder's cinematic interpretation, the three hundred Spartans are a group of extra-ordinary men facing the might of the Persian army.

Nevertheless, the comic book's sub-textual nuances regarding modern American beliefs are noticeable and, suggestively, deliberate. Miller's outspoken political views are, at the very least, patriotic and the comic book's release in 1998 occurred shortly after tensions between the United States and Iran, formerly Persia, had eased. This significant fact cannot be overlooked when considering the film's release in 2007. On September 11th, 2001, the September 11 attacks, the terrorist group al Qaeda flew into the World Trade Center in New York, killing thousands. The shock, anger, and worldwide reverberations of the attacks, known as 9/11, continue to the present day and are a reflection on the timing of *300*'s cinematic release, occurring after the initial alarm had subsided but still remained vivid in people's memories. In response to 9/11, Miller stated "Patriotism, in 1990 believe, isn't some sentimental, old concept. It's self preservation" ("That Old Piece of Cloth"). This theme is evident in *300*'s basic storyline, yet, regardless of Snyder's consistent disclaimer that he did not make the film as a comment on current tensions (a view that was also supported by Warner Bros.), Miller's overt views and influence cannot be ignored.

This may seem an irrelevant factor when considering the differences between mainstream cinema and the role of the auteur; however, the popularity of Miller's comic books such as *Sin City* and *Batman: The Dark Knight and Dark Knight Returns*, which were later made into high-grossing films, coupled with his own forays into filmmaking through *300* and *Red Tails* (2006), have cemented his reputation as a filmmaker. Paul Watson, who has a career that often thrives on "the cult of the celebrity" and filmmaking industry, Miller's popularity and influence in an emerging billion-dollar filmmaking sub-culture that focusses on bringing the influence of comic book genre to the screen would almost certainly have piqued Snyder's interest.

As a filmmaker who had previously made a remake of the comic-based *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and was a self-proclaimed fan of Frank Miller (Dillillo 7), Snyder's aim of "faithfully translating Miller's script," bodily depictions of war exactly from the page to the screen" (Dillillo 7) reflects his admiration for Miller and confidence in *300*'s storyline and high-grossing potential. Consequently, *300*'s reach into several sub-genres, the popularity of Miller, and an inspiring storyline suggested its potentiality for mass-market appeal.

An exciting story and commercial popularity are common features of mainstream, classical Hollywood cinema, but a distinction needed to be made between this and the studio system already in place. Unlike the former studio system that operated from approximately 1920 until circa 1950 that, under the control of the major Hollywood studios such as MGM and Warner Bros., oversaw all facets of a film's production, distribution, and exhibition (Nelmes 499), mainstream, current classical Hollywood cinema offers a more flexible approach. As an example instead, mainstream cinema involves a feature-length movie with a linear narrative that is aimed at the mass market as a potentially high-grossing form of entertainment. This means that this style of film is not restricted to Hollywood but all films that pertain to this model. Thus, to be more specific, the additional designation of a classical Hollywood style defines the linear narrative further to include cause and effect, continuity editing, a *mise-en-scène* (the composition of a shot, including everything that appears before the camera) that alludes to a sense of cinematic realism, the inclusion of cultural stereotypes that plausibly meet social or genre criteria, and a main protagonist(s) who has clear-cut goals and problems (Villarejo 153). This overall emphasis on almost invisible production methods to make the visual perspective of the film, its plot, and its characters seem as if they are real and to specifically meet social and cultural expectations defines the narrative and cinematic approach adopted for *300*. To understand the manner in which some of these descriptions operate within film, let us briefly consider the actual differences between Miller's novel and *300*'s cinematic interpretation within film, let us briefly consider the actual differences between Miller's novel and *300*'s cinematic interpretation.

One of the clearest examples of the differences between Miller's novel and Snyder's interpretation is the film's emphasis on *mise-en-scène*. The film offers no comparison with comic book series. Any attempt to replicate the comic book on this level would offer a disjointed narrative and a complete lack of realism; however, Snyder's familiar use of slow motion techniques, such as in the fight scenes between the Greeks and Persians, accentuates the brutality of war and pays homage to the individual frames of Miller's work, which are not evenly divided but vary in size to emphasize certain significant events. The closeness in their visual appearance with Miller's novel illuminates his artistry and clever use of the Spartan's physiques during battle, while the overall effect intensifies the action, encouraging viewer interest and excitement.

Nevertheless, although Snyder does replicate Miller's novel by closely adhering to the main characters, visual impact, and thread of the story – in fact, many images and script lines can directly be cross-referenced to the novel – Miller incorporated historically-based, social and cultural depictions of the Spartans that may have not been palatable for contemporary audiences. For example, in his *300* a frame depicts the Spartans combining their hands and holding them before the battle (cf. "Knox" of "Herodotus 7.208), an instance which is omitted by Snyder. Similarly, Snyder added scenes, which do not detract from the original drama, but rather act as embellishments to emphasize specific elements or add to the film's emotive force. For instance, the additional scene featuring the "Tree of the Dead" depicts a lifeless tree in a scorched landscape covered with the naked, dead bodies of citizens from a village. An orphaned, dying child nearby confirms that the destruction of the village is a direct result of the Persian invasion. In its comic book origins and immediately emphasizes Persia's wish to annihilate the empire and its people, and his conception of cinema, unconcerned if some of his films did not reach an expected quality" (cf. "Using Film Criticism Like a Sword").

Truffaut's use of the role of the auteur in film was popularized by the American film critic Andrew Sarris in his essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." Sarris acknowledges that there is no definition of the auteur in his essay "English Language." In fact, the auteur theory itself is a pattern theory (Lindsay 2007). This aspect, however, He does attempt, however, to provide a series of loose parameters for the role of the auteur in film: "The three premises of the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning. The corresponding roles of the director may be designated as those of a technician, a stylist, and an auteur" (563). Thus, taking these accounts into consideration, auteur theory is broadly indicative of the individual style of the director, permeating the *mise-en-scène* of a film with his or her own indelible mark or signature and is a continuous creative process with no definable technique or structure.

Nevertheless, one of the first outspoken opponents against the auteur theory was the American film critic Pauline Kael, whose article "Circles and Squares" lambasted Sarris' defining principles, questioning their theoretical place within filmmaking (12-26). Kael heralded an increasing trend away from the role of the auteur that has continued through the present day. Film-makers are no longer the auteur; rather, they are just the stewards of the studio. Some of the best filmmaking practices such as mainstream, classical Hollywood cinema. This, while art-house or avant garde cinema are recognized as original and unique, the director, who is often the inspiration behind such films, is grouped within a collaborative process. This is not to deny the role of a production team, as Fellini acknowledges:

I am now up against the production people, trying to salvage something that belongs to me and no longer to the film. The film, now, has changed into a financial operation which the production people defend tooth and nail; and the film itself gives up the struggle. I am on this side, defending the origins from which I have seen it born, with all the impulsion and oddity that obviously governed it. I have my own graces. Hence grudges, rage, flight, illness, all of which must be endured. (162)

Fellini's words exemplify his self-determination to retain the film as he envisioned it by the American film critic Andrew Sarris in his essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." Sarris acknowledges that there is no definition of the auteur in his essay "English Language." In fact, the auteur theory itself is a pattern theory (Lindsay 2007). This aspect, however, He does attempt, however, to provide a series of loose parameters for the role of the auteur in film: "The three premises of the auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning. The corresponding roles of the director may be designated as those of a technician, a stylist, and an auteur" (563). Thus, taking these accounts into consideration, auteur theory is broadly indicative of the individual style of the director, permeating the *mise-en-scène* of a film with his or her own indelible mark or signature and is a continuous creative process with no definable technique or structure.

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IV. *Fellini-Satyricon* – the Auteur and Art-house Cinema

Since its inception in 1954 the idea of the auteur or auteur theory has provoked controversial responses from film critics. The concept and term were the result of the French film critic François Truffaut's essay "Une Certaine tendance du cinéma française" ("A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema"), which was published in the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The progressive nature of Truffaut's work is that he moved away from the traditional role of the scriptwriters of the day for being too reliant on literature rather than art, thereby heralding the auteur's role in cinema. Truffaut advocated the need for a film's director to creatively overrule any other person involved in the film's production; in other words, he believed a film should represent a personal form of cinematic expression. Juan Carlos A. González, a contributor to the film journal *Senses of Cinema*, explains Truffaut's doctrine: "As a critic, it would permit the development of his theory of authorship, the *politique des auteurs*," a concept that distinguished the profound knowledge of the film director and put forth an undefeatable defence of his style – marked by a high degree of artistic autonomy – and his conception of cinema, unconcerned if some of his films did not reach an expected quality" (cf. "Using Film Criticism Like a Sword").

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