

Introduction to “Ancient History and Hollywood Film”

Hi, I’m Art Eckstein. I’m a Professor of History and Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland, College Park. And welcome to “Ancient History and Hollywood Film”! I was trained here at Cal as a historian of the Ancient Mediterranean, and specifically of Roman imperial expansion and administration: the result was four books and about fifty articles. But I also grew up in Los Angeles among screenwriters, and my fascination with that culture has endured: as a result I’ve also written several articles and a book on Hollywood history. That work focused on the 1950s and 1960s

I’ve done four previous film courses for OLLI at Cal. As in those courses, my emphasis in our course “Ancient History and Hollywood Film” is on film as shared *fantasy* and social *myth*. We’ll be looking at movies depicting the far past that yet emanated from the nation’s dream life, and returned to shape

it. The four films I've chosen are revealing of the society that created them.

So this is a course about the relationship between film and social-political history. My emphasis in these Hollywood films about Ancient History is on movies as shared popular *fantasy* and as shared American social *mythology*. The topic is a rich one, and In fact it was difficult restricting myself to only four films! But that is the nature of our summer courses.

The Mechanics of the Course

Our four meetings will be on zoom. In these meetings I'll first lecture for 45 or 50 minutes; then there'll be a short break; then we'll have a question and discussion session for 40 minutes or so. The films are all serious attempts to depict the Ancient World, and I'll discuss how well they succeed. But the lectures will also focus on the contemporary political background and meaning of the films. And sometimes on their production history: the complex struggle to get them

made. All of this will tell us a great deal about Hollywood, and maybe something too about the Ancient World.

Participants in the course will have access each week to an on-line “Terms and Concepts” sheet which will help you follow along in the lectures. The most important point, though, is that people should see each scheduled film at some point soon before the weekly meeting. Each film is available for streaming, either for free or at a small rental fee.

The course meets on Tuesdays at 10:30 a.m., starting on Tuesday, June 3.

Course Syllabus:

Week I (June 3): *The Ten Commandments* (1956, dir.: Cecil B. DeMille; starring Yul Brynner, Charlton Heston and Anne Baxter): How to handle a magnificent ancient text, Part I: Cold War Pharoah is an atheist who speaks with a Russian accent!

Week II (June 10): *Troy* (2004; dir.: Wolfgang Petersen, starring Brad Pitt, Eric Banna, Diane Kruger): How to handle a magnificent ancient text, Part II: Brad Pitt as glorious Achilles.

Week III (June 17): *Spartacus* (1960: dir. Stanley Kubrick, starring Kirk Douglas, Laurence Olivier and Jean Simmons). The civil rights movement in the 70's BC

Week IV (June 24): *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988: dir. Martin Scorsese, starring Willem Dafoe, Harvey Keitel, Barbara Hershey): not your usual Biblical epic. David Bowie as Pontius Pilate! To be compared with DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*.

As participants prepare to watch these four films, it's good to be aware that three of these four films are massive, "epic" productions, spectacular, and all four films are long. *The Ten Commandments* (1956) is 3 hrs and 40 minutes (with an additional intermission); *Troy* (2004) is 2 hrs and 43 minutes; *Spartacus* (1960) is 3 hrs and 17 minutes; *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), though on a smaller visual scale than the first three, runs 2 hrs and 40 minutes. It's ambitious entertainment.

Hope to see you there!

Contact information: ameckst1@umd.edu