

HONORS PROJECT TITLE PAGE

THE TRENDS IN ACCURACY OF ANCIENT HISTORY IN FILMED MEDIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON SOCIETY AND EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

For this paper, I researched three intertwined problems. How have accuracies and inaccuracies of historical filmed media changed throughout time and historical contexts? What are these films' effects on society and education? Are these films moving away from the truth when their educational worth grows yearly?

I started my study by first choosing what filmed media I would investigate. I choose a total of twenty instances of filmed media (films and television episodes/series) ranging from 1908 to 2023. I decided to choose ones that were relatively popular since these would have reached and affected the most people. I then proceeded to watch all the films, taking notes and making connections along the way, until I was able to divide them into categories based on genres and aspects of them that were similar. These eventually became chapters 2-7. Throughout these, I analyzed the historical accuracy of each film and the commonalities between them. Following this, I researched trends in film popularity and history education to analyze the historical knowledge at each's time and the potential dangers that inaccuracies could pose because of it.

Ultimately, I found out that historical filmed media has not become more or less accurate over time. The real issue, however, is the need for increased historical education and properly preparing students to recognize and research any inaccuracies they might come across. The success of this rides on the backs of educators and will decide how easily media can change historical memories of figures and events.

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SURVEY RESULTS

CHAPTER 1: HISTORY ON SCREEN AND IN EDUCATION

For millennia, reproduced history has been used as a form of visual entertainment. Since the days of the ancient Greeks, we have found fifth century plays like Aeschylus' *Persae*, which recounted the Battle of Salamis¹, and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, which satirizes the end of the Peloponnesian War², enjoyable. The ancient Romans also produced reenactments of historical events in the Colosseum³ and would even recreate naval battles by flooding the stadium⁴. In the past few centuries, historical entertainment shifted back to what we now think of as the more traditional English stage with plays like Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* and Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. With the turn of the twentieth century and the advent of film, many history films became adaptations of such plays like *Julius Caesar* (1908) and books like *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925). It only follows that with the refining of techniques and improvements in technology that larger and more diverse films would follow. There are large epics surrounding legends such as *Clash of the Titans* (1981, 2010), sword-and-sandals films such as *Spartacus* (1960) and *300* (2006), and even comedies such as *HISTORY OF THE WORLD: Part I* (1981).

With the permeation and accessibility of films through our society, it is only natural that it has found a home in classrooms like smartboards and even video games have. They provide several advantages such as being easily accessible dramatizations of events and visual aids to help students better understand events, figures, and learning materials. The increase of technology use outside

¹ Simon Goldhill, "Battle Narrative and Politics in Aeschylus' *Persae*." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108 (1988): 189-193, <https://jstor.org/stable/632642>.

² Helene P. Foley, "The 'Female Intruder' Reconsidered: Women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae*." *Classical Philology* 77, no. 1 (1982): 1-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/269802>.

³ Dean Hammer, "Roman Spectacle Entertainments and the Technology of Reality." *Arethusa* 43, no. 1 (2010): 63-86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44578318>.

⁴ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*. Epitome of Book LXVI, 25, [Trans. Thayer].

of school and access to films in that way helps their use for education as well. However, there is a large separation in the goals of films versus the goals of education. While some films may aim to educate, like documentaries, at the end of the day the goal is to make money. To do this, filmmakers may not necessarily be concerned with what is correct and might do whatever they think will entice audiences the most. On the contrary, the goal of education is to educate and usually present the truth and what historians believe occurred based on research findings.

This conflict of interest could easily pose issues for the educational sphere. History is not always money-making, in fact, at times it can be quite expensive and not worth adapting. Striking visuals and events within a budget that can bring in a profit are what make money. This can also lead to exciting changes for the big screen to create a bigger impact on the audience. The best examples of this are Perseus fighting Medusa rather than killing her in her sleep in the *Clash of the Titans* films in 1981 and 2010 and Xerxes' striking depiction in *300* (2006). If changes are prevalent and recurrent enough, they can easily change historical memory. The 1981 *Clash of the Titans* was the first depiction of the Gorgon with a serpentine lower half when Greek depictions of her had legs⁵ and now when many people think of Medusa, this is how they usually picture her⁶. It is important to understand the accuracies and inaccuracies of films along with their historical context in order to see the effects they have on society and education. This is in addition to whether we are moving away from the truth in film when its educational worth is growing with each passing year. However, it is important to note first that any accuracies and inaccuracies are in relation to

⁵ Madeleine Glennon, "Medusa in Ancient Greek Art." The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, March 2017, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/medu/hdmedu.htm>.

⁶ In a survey I conducted, 8/10 participants said they think of Medusa having a snake tail rather than legs. Medusa Survey on page 130.

the historical record and what historians perceive as likely “truths” in a sea of varying interpretations.

CHAPTER 2: THE LEGENDS

Clash of the Titans (1981), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925),
Ben-Hur (1959), *Ben-Hur* (2016)

As there is typically much more fantasy behind them, I have decided to cover movies regarding legends in this separate chapter. Much of this chapter will be focused on *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and *Clash of the Titans* (2010), but I will also cover the Biblical aspects of the *Ben-Hur* films in this chapter as well. My reasoning for this is that, while many claim it is true, there is no solid evidence proving the truth of accounts of Jesus' life in both the Bible and accounts by the Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. I will not be arguing whether these events really occurred—that is the job of theologians—but analyzing whether the myths/legends from the Bible and historical accounts of Jesus are accurately portrayed on film.

One may ask though, “Why exactly is the accuracy of myth important? They are made-up stories anyway.” They are important because these stories characterize the societies that they stemmed from. Their values, customs, and ways of life all stem from their legends. In the case of the legend of Perseus in *Clash of the Titans*, it tells you how the ancient Greeks viewed their gods, their values about masculinity and heroics, and their fears of great monsters. As for Jesus's story in the *Ben-Hur* films, it is important because of the impact the story has on society to this day with Christianity being one of the most prominent religions on the planet. It also shows the values of a large group of people and why they have them which is important with the many impacts the religion has had—especially in Europe (crusades, Protestant Reformation, holy wars). These looking glasses into the hearts and minds of people of the past are what make the accuracy of these myths and legends so important. If inaccurate, it could change how we see these civilizations entirely.

Before getting into the plot of either *Clash of the Titans* film, let us recap the Greek legend of Perseus—or at least the parts relevant to the films. Our story begins with King Acrisius of Argos learning from the oracle that his grandson will kill him. This leads him to stuff his daughter, Danae, and her child, Perseus—whom Zeus himself had fathered—into a chest and have them thrown into the sea to drown. The two survive, however, and wash up on the island of Seriphus where Dictys, the king of Seriphus’ brother, takes up and raises Perseus.⁷ Years later, the king, Polydectes, falls in love with Danae but needs to be rid of Perseus first. To do this, he plots for his friends, including Perseus, to present wedding gifts to him for someone else but, contrary to the horses the others are asked for, Perseus is ordered to bring him the head of a Gorgon.

Under guidance by the gods Hermes and Athena, Perseus sets out to the daughters of Phorcus, elderly sisters of the Gorgons who all share one eye and one tooth. When Perseus faces them, he gets ahold of both the eye and the tooth, using them as ransom for guidance to where the nymphs are. They comply and Perseus goes to the nymphs where he acquires winged sandals, a kisisibis—large sack—and the cap of Hades which grants invisibility. The nymphs then show him the way to the Gorgons, and he once again sets off, flying to the ocean where the Gorgons resided nearby. It is important to note that Hermes also gives Perseus an adamantine sickle before his departure. Upon his arrival, Perseus finds the Gorgon sisters: Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa—of which solely Medusa was mortal. Using a bronze shield as a mirror to avoid the gaze of the Gorgons that turns one to stone, Perseus, his sword in hand and guided by the goddess Athena, beheads Medusa in her sleep. From the neck of the corpse then springs Pegasus and Chrysaor—Medusa’s children by Poseidon—whom Perseus seemingly pays no mind to.⁸

⁷ Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*. 2.4.1. [Trans. Frazer].

⁸ *Bibliotheca*. 2.4.2, [Trans. Frazer].

With his prize in hand, Perseus then places Medusa's head in the kisibis and escapes the other Gorgons' pursuit using his flight and invisibility. Rather than returning to Seriphus, Perseus flies to Aethiopia to find Andromeda, the daughter of King Cepheus, bound to a rock and about to be sacrificed to a sea monster because of her mother, Cassiopeia, claimed her daughter's beauty was greater than that of the Nereids. This invoked the wrath of both the Nereids and Poseidon who sent a flood and monster to destroy the land unless Andromeda is sacrificed to it. Falling in love at first sight, Perseus resolves to kill the monster as long as Cepheus gives him Andromeda. Cepheus agrees and Perseus kills the monster with the head of Medusa, despite Andromeda already being promised to Cepheus' brother, Phineus. Phineus then plots against Perseus and is turned to stone in retaliation. It is only after this that Perseus finally returns to Seriphus and turns Polydectes and his friends to stone for his being violent towards Perseus' mother. Following this, Dictys is appointed the king of Seriphus and Perseus returns the hat, sandals, and kisibis to Hermes and gives the head of Medusa to Athena.⁹

Clash of the Titans (1981) generally follows the same premise as the original legend of Perseus with some changes to add to the story and events shifted around. Perseus and his mother are cast into the sea, and, when he is grown up, he is transported to Joppa in Phoenicia to face trials where he meets Andromeda before she is set to be made into a sacrifice to the Kraken. He then sets out on a journey to kill Medusa and bring back her head to kill the Kraken and save Andromeda.¹⁰ While there are many more errors than faithful depictions, there are still very many accurate aspects of the film. For starters, Andromeda is made to be a sacrifice for her mother's claiming something more beautiful than a higher being—Thetis instead of the Nereids. The

⁹ *Bibliotheca*. 2.4.3. [Trans. Frazer].

¹⁰ Desmond Davis, *Clash of the Titans*. June 12, 1981; USA; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1981.

daughters of Phorcus are also still present and share a single eye which Perseus takes as ransom for Medusa's location—however, the tooth is not present. Once again, several divine gifts are given to Perseus, albeit changed slightly. Additionally, Perseus still arrives just in the nick of time, flying in as Andromeda is chained to a rock to be sacrificed to a sea monster before it is turned to stone by Medusa's severed head—the difference here being his arrival on Pegasus versus with winged sandals.¹¹ Before addressing this film's issues, the 2010 remake must be addressed first.

Clash of the Titans (2010) has a quite different storyline compared to both the original film and the original legend. In this film, we once again follow Perseus who was cast into the sea by King Acrisius and grows up a strong man. Once he is grown up, his family is killed by Hades after they witness soldiers of Argos tearing down a statue of Zeus. Perseus is then taken to Argos and brought before the royal family moments before Cassiopeia claims they are gods, calling forth Hades who kills her, announces that Andromeda must be sacrificed, and reveals that Perseus is a demigod, causing him to be persecuted. He then goes out with the Argos legions to visit the Stygian witches and learn how to kill the Kraken. He eventually does this and makes his way to the underworld to kill Medusa once again and the events of the 1981 film follow from this for the most part.

What is strange about this film is that, while it is riddled with errors in nearly every aspect, it still follows the basic story beats of the first movie: King Acrisius sends his daughter and her son to die because Zeus impregnated her, the two survive and live happy lives, Perseus meets Andromeda, she is set to be a sacrifice, then Perseus kills Medusa to defeat the Kraken and save the day. What is even stranger is that it gets an aspect of Perseus' character from the original myth

¹¹ Davis, *Clash of the Titans*. 1981.

right that the 1981 film got wrong. Perseus is very self-serving in this film. Though he is extremely erroneous in his hate of the gods and initial ignorance of his divine heritage, this is a key part of his character that was actually done better than the original film. In the base legends, after killing Medusa, Perseus travels around using her head for his own gain and only helps Andromeda because her father promised him her hand in marriage if he did so.¹² In the 2010 film, Perseus only goes to kill Medusa and the Kraken so he can get revenge against the gods—specifically Hades—for killing his family. He has no interest in saving Andromeda or fighting otherwise, doing so simply for his own gain.¹³

Clash of the Titans 2010 takes many more creative liberties with the myth compared to the 1981 film. This is likely due to when the film was released. From the 1990s, action films started to move away from typical “sword and sandal” action movies that characterized the period the original *Clash of the Titans* released during. The 2010 film had to compete against large spectacle movies such as the *Harry Potter* franchise, *Iron Man*, *Independence Day*, *Godzilla* (1998), *Cloverfield*, *300*, *Inception*, and the *Bourne* series. To compete with these event films, everything had to be much more grandiose; there needs to be a man versus gods conflict, the Kraken needed to be a gigantic kaiju¹⁴ that looks eerily similar to *Cloverfield*, Medusa has to be in a lava-filled temple, and Perseus needs to kill Hades—who is portrayed as essentially a copy of Voldemort from *Harry Potter* and by the same actor as well.¹⁵

¹² *Bibliotheca*, 2.4.3. [Trans. Frazer].

¹³ Louis Leterrier, *Clash of the Titans*. April 2, 2010; USA; Legendary Pictures, 2010.

¹⁴ Japanese for “strange creature”. The term used to describe giant fictional monsters like *Godzilla*, *Cloverfield*, the monsters in *Pacific Rim*, *Gamera*, and Legendary’s *Kong*.

¹⁵ “Ralph Fiennes | Actor, Director, Producer.” IMDb. Accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000146/>.

The 2010 film also suffers from several more tropes and unique changes for the sake of moving the story than the 1981 film as well. After each example, I will explain why it happened and if and why these changes are detrimental. King Acrisius is turned into Calibos—instead of Calibos being himself—to create a father versus son trope like that of *Star Wars*. This does not heavily affect the story but is potentially to give King Acrisius a bigger role and to allow Perseus to kill him as he did in the legend.¹⁶ Perseus’ divine gifts are also changed in this film. The divine sword that he receives again now appears similar to a light saber to present its power and connection to the gods—specifically Zeus. He also does not receive the cap of invisibility or shield throughout the film but does get Pegasus after killing Medusa—still not from her dead body.¹⁷ Furthermore, the diminishing of the holy gifts is likely to solidify the man versus gods concept and make Perseus’ feats as a “man” more impressive as he refuses to use the sword until after he has already killed Medusa and is left unarmed against his father. While these may not directly have adverse effects, this film also does something strange with two other character positions that both versions share and could be perceived negatively.

Since Andromeda is not the love interest here, someone else needs to assume the role of damsel in distress. Here, one of Argos’ past princesses, Io, takes the role as both Perseus’ love interest and the wise guide that Ammon acted as in the 1981 film.¹⁸ What is strange is that, here, they attached Io to Perseus by changing her story to her becoming ageless and watching over him rather than being turned into a cow and back by Zeus after she refused his advances.¹⁹ The change from Andromeda to Io is likely to underline Perseus’ selfishness against Andromeda and his

¹⁶ *Bibliotheca*. 2.4.4. [Trans. Frazer].

¹⁷ Leterrier. *Clash of the Titans*. 2010.

¹⁸ Leterrier. *Clash of the Titans*. 2010.

¹⁹ M. C. Howatson and Ian Chilvers, *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1993): 288-289.

https://www.oxfordreference.com/views/BOOK_SEARCH.html?book=t9.

connection to the gods. The changing of her backstory might be to ground her a bit more in reality in a fantastic scenario. However, it is far more likely that she was simply used as a replacement love interest for Perseus after writing off Andromeda as his damsel in distress. Io's placement in this film not only negatively affects how people see the legend, but also how her story is known. That, however, is not as important as other figures in the two films.

Both *Clash of the Titans* films share several aspects that lead to errors of varying degrees. The biggest thing that affects both films is having to make the legend's monsters more monstrous. Monsters that pose bigger threats both to the hero and the world at large are much more likely to attract audiences than no monsters or ones that are smaller and not well-known. The case-in-point of one being added for plot purposes is Calibos. The monster Calibos—whether being Calibos himself or Acrisius—was not in the Greek legend. His position as an antagonist throughout both films speaks for itself. It fits much better to have a constant threat facing Perseus in smaller encounters throughout his journey on top of the witches, Medusa, and the Kraken than those three alone. He acts as a foil to Perseus that throws a wrench—or a whip in the 1981 film—into his plans whenever possible. In the 2010 film, this role also falls onto Hades who is the overarching villain that creates the threats of Calibos and the Kraken. This is due to the 2010 film being less of a historical epic and more of simply a heroic epic with fantastic monsters and a “big bad” to suit modern audiences. It is also important to note that Hades' depiction is similar to *Harry Potter's* Voldemort—as previously stated—in the way he talks, his goals, and his actions/powers. This is only further proof of trying to fit in with modern blockbuster epics. This is an odd change though,

since Hades was one of the gods that gave Perseus a divine gift—the invisibility cap—in the Greek legend²⁰, making him seem much more like the evil god of the underworld than just another god.

Another change that was made to create a better monster is how Medusa is portrayed. In both films, she is given the typical snake hair and eyes that turn people to stone with which she was cursed. The big change here is that the rest of her body is made to be a snake from the waist down ending with a rattle. In the 1981 film her entire body, including her face, is covered in scales as well.²¹ Her face is kept human in the 2010 film—spare for when she turns people to stone—and is more accurate in this way.²² Historical depictions of Medusa present her as a human with tusks (or fangs), wings, and snakes for hair.²³ The tusks and wings are missing from both films, likely to put more emphasis on her snakelike aspects and appear as more of a monster in that way—especially in the 1981 film. In fact, it was the 1981 *Clash of the Titans* that first depicted Medusa with a snake’s lower half, starting the trend of her appearing that way in media to modern day. In all earlier depictions, she was given legs. This got to the point where, as stated in Chapter 1, when people think of Medusa, they often imagine her with a snake body rather than human legs²⁴.

Both films also make Medusa a much fiercer foe than the legendary depiction to create a more monstrous and dangerous set piece to pit Perseus against. The fight against her in both films is long and drawn out, with Perseus being the only survivor of both. As previously mentioned when recounting the antiquated tale though, there was no fight in the first place. Perseus simply chopped Medusa’s head off in her sleep with a little help from Athena.²⁵ While the divine help is

²⁰ *Bibliotheca*. 2.4.2. [Trans. Thayer].

²¹ Davis, *Clash of the Titans*. 1981.

²² Leterrier, *Clash of the Titans*. 2010.

²³ Glennon, “Medusa in Ancient Greek Art.”

²⁴ In a survey I conducted, 8/10 participants said they think of Medusa having a snake tail rather than legs. Medusa Survey on page 130.

²⁵ *Bibliotheca*. 2.4.2. [Trans. Thayer].

present in the 1981 film, it is only through his sword and shield, not divine guidance (in the 2010 film it is all raw demi-human ability). While the traditional mythological Medusa was definitely a large threat—hence Perseus sneak attacking her—the danger Perseus himself faces is blown largely out of proportion to create a spectacular fight that puts the viewer on the edge of their seat. This not only changed the historical memory of Perseus’ heroism, but also how Medusa appears and the dangers she poses. One could even argue that the film made her less dangerous by removing the ability of flight and massive tusks from her character.

There are also profound changes made to “The Kraken” in both films as well. Before getting into portrayal, however, the name must be addressed. Greek mythology did not have a “Kraken”. The word is actually of Scandinavian origin and refers to a giant octopus or squid-like creature.²⁶ In reality, the sea monster that Perseus fought was likely a Cetus. Cetus in Greek mythology were sea serpents similar to Chinese dragons.²⁷ A depiction of the sea monster on Greek pottery shows the monster even having fur or hair around its head.²⁸ Looking at the Kraken’s depiction in either film, one can immediately see a stark contrast between a sea serpent and the monstrous creatures created for the film. The 2010 iteration is less like a sea monster and more like a kaiju similar to Godzilla or the Cloverfield monster.²⁹ The 1981 iteration of the Kraken is a bit closer to traditional descriptions of the legendary beast in that it has a serpentine body spare for

²⁶ Kerry Lotzof, “Sea Monsters and Their Inspiration: Serpents, Mermaids, the Kraken and More.” Natural History Museum, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/sea-monsters-inspiration-serpents-mermaids-the-kraken.html>.

²⁷ “File: Ritual Tray with a Nereid (Sea Nymph) and a Cherub Riding a Sea Mosnter (Ketos) LACMA M.2003.70.jpg.” July 16, 2013, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ritual_Tray_with_a_Nereid_\(Sea_Nymph\)_and_a_Cherub_Riding_a_Sea_Monster_\(Ketos\)_LACMA_M.2003.70.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ritual_Tray_with_a_Nereid_(Sea_Nymph)_and_a_Cherub_Riding_a_Sea_Monster_(Ketos)_LACMA_M.2003.70.jpg).

²⁸ “File: Corinthian Vase depicting perseus, Andromeda and ketos.jpg.” June 29, 2006, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Corinthian_Vase_depicting_Perseus,_Andromeda_and_Ketos.jpg.

²⁹ Leterrier, *Clash of the Titans*. 2010.

its four arms and a head similar to the Creature from the Black Lagoon.³⁰ In the '81 film's case, these changes were likely to make the beast more fantastical and different from traditional sea serpents on film like Manda from the Godzilla franchise. The 2010 film is also competing with Godzilla in a way in that it turns the Kraken into a Godzilla-sized monster that shares much more similarities with other kaiju than the 1981 Kraken or a Cetus to compete with the prior decades' myriad of giant monster films.

One last change I would like to point out is the films' settings. In the Greek legend, Perseus finds Andromeda at Aethiopia: the inhabited lands south of Egypt.³¹ In the 1981 film, Perseus is transported to Joppa in Phoenicia—northwest of Jerusalem³²—and in the 2010 film he finds Andromeda at Argos in Southeastern Greece³³. In the 1981 film, the use of Joppa is probably to use a more familiar place that audiences might recognize—being close to Jerusalem and likely at least knowing of Phoenicia—rather than a large area of Africa. In the 2010 film's case, the reason for Perseus' return to Argos after being cast into the sea is possibly to keep the locations to a minimum and/or because King Acrisius needed to be banished after Zeus turned him into a monster. However, for either film, it is also possible that this change was because having a movie in Aethiopia with a Black cast and depiction of Andromeda could have caused issues at the box office. Though moving towards greater equality, there is still a lot of civil strife in the United States. It is very much a possibility that the films' production teams saw the original setting as problematic in that way, even at the time when the United States elected its first African American

³⁰ Davis, *Clash of the Titans*, 1981.

³¹ William Smith. "Aethio'pia." *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*. 1854.

³² "Jaffa." Wikipedia, accessed October 18, 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaffa>.

³³ "Argos, Peloponnese." Wikipedia, accessed November 1, 2023, https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Argos,_Peloponnese.

president.³⁴ It could also have been changed from Joppa to avoid the Middle East after the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror spurred a growth of racism against Muslims and the Middle East.³⁵

While both *Clash of the Titans* films get the basic barebones story of Perseus correct—albeit among creative liberties and falsities—it is interesting what each film tends to get right compared to the other. The 1981 film tends to get the bigger details like Perseus’ assistance from the gods, his relationship with Andromeda, and the Kraken’s design somewhat correct. The 2010 film gets more smaller details right that the 1981 film overlooks or casts aside. Perseus is much more self-serving, Andromeda’s father is present, and Medusa’s face is still human. Both films get the same things wrong for the most part due to each of their theatrical and entertainment needs, but how each goes about inserting smaller, less significant historical details is interesting. Each is harmful to historical memory in its own ways, but the 2010 film, by having many more aspects and tropes to pander to in its time, strays much farther from greater historical accuracy than its 1981 iteration. One portrays the power of the gods and heroism by a young man while the other portrays heroism by a selfish young man who hates the gods. These portray how the Greeks saw their gods quite differently and in the latter case makes them look as if they hated the gods enough to wage war on them—which is not true.

The next set of films I would like to talk about are *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *Ben-Hur* (2016). For each of these I will analyze the aspects of Christ they show, including his portrayal, birth, general aspects of his life, and death.

³⁴ Barack Obama was elected President in 2008, two years before the 2010 film released.

³⁵ Katayoun Kishi, “Assaults against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level.” Pew Research Center, November 15, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>.

Starting with his physical depiction, Jesus' portrayal in each film is unique. In the 1925 film, Jesus' skin is never shown more than his hand and around his wrist. Anything other than that is hidden with cloth—including his face with a hood when he marches through Jerusalem. For most of it he also glows with a bright white light hiding any distinguishing features of cloth or skin.³⁶ This might be due to Evangelical and Calvinist Christians believing that Jesus should not be physically represented in connection to the second Commandment.³⁷ In the 1959 film, Jesus is depicted rather traditionally with a white robe and wavy brown hair, but his face is never shown³⁸—possibly for the same reasons as the 1925 film but to a lesser degree. The 2016 film shows Jesus's face and all but less like typical depictions and more like a normal man that you could find anywhere at the time. He still has long hair and a goatee like traditional depictions of Jesus spare for having dark brown hair and normal clothes rather than a white robe or gown.³⁹ Of these, the 2016 depiction is the most accurate and lifelike since Jesus likely did not glow like a light bulb and would not have been spotless, beautiful, and with perfectly combed hair in the 33 CE Middle East, especially being a traveling preacher.

The 1925 and 1959 films start with the birth of Jesus and follow the basic story told in the New Testament. Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem where Mary gives birth to Jesus, the son of the Holy Ghost. Meanwhile, three wise men see a star appear over where the baby is born, go to him to present gifts, then leave together.⁴⁰ Between the two, there are slight differences in how the events are pictured and described. Something that needs to be noted is that, in the 1959 film, this

³⁶ Fred Niblo, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. December 30, 1925; USA; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1925.

³⁷ Exodus 20 (New International Version).

³⁸ William Wyler, *Ben-Hur*. November 18, 1959; USA; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959.

³⁹ Timur Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. August 9, 2016; USA; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2016.

⁴⁰ Matt. 1:18-2:12.

takes place in the seventh year of Augustus.⁴¹ This would place Jesus' birth in 20 BCE⁴², years ahead of his estimated birth year sometime between 8 and 4 BCE⁴³—not even the old belief of Jesus being born in “0 AD”⁴⁴. Taking this into account, Jesus would have been crucified sometime between 10-20 CE. This is strange as it would make Jesus at least 46 years old (Pontius Pilate became governor of Judea in 26 CE⁴⁵) at the time of his death when it is stated that he was about thirty at the time of his death⁴⁶. This is damaging to how people might perceive the period he lived in as Jesus lived mostly under Tiberius⁴⁷, not Augustus. There were many differences between the two rulers' periods, with Rome having only recently become an empire and many aspects and borders changing under both rulers. Each had their own ways of administering the empire as well, so to have them misplaced places Jesus and Jerusalem in vastly different historical contexts.

Another aspect I want to address is that the 1959 and 2016 *Ben-Hur* films show Jesus doing carpentry⁴⁸ while the 1925 film does not.⁴⁹ This adds important context to his characterization because it shows that behind being the Messiah, he was still a worldly man that faced the same issues of needing to eat, sleep, and work that the average person also faces. The 1925 film does not state whether he is simply at the carpenter shop, nearby, or working in it. To someone that does not know the tale of the Christ, this is an important aspect of his character that might go unnoticed.

⁴¹ Wyler, *Ben-Hur*, 1959.

⁴² Augustus' rule began in 27 BCE. Adrian Goldsworthy, *Augustus: First Emperor of Rome* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 201): 245.

⁴³ Clayton Kraby, “What Year Was Jesus Actually Born?” ReasonableTheology.org, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://reasonabletheology.org/year-jesus-actually-born>.

⁴⁴ BC incorrectly stands for “Before Christ” and AD “After Death”. Paul Brians, “Common Errors in English Usage and More AD Comments.” Washington State University, May 16, 2016. <https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/5/16/a-d/>.

⁴⁵ Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1998): 1.

⁴⁶ Luke. 3:23.

⁴⁷ Tiberius ruled from 14-37 CE. Goldsworthy, 511. & George Philip Baker, *Tiberius Caesar* (Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1929): 291-296.

⁴⁸ Jesus was a carpenter. Mark. 6:3.

⁴⁹ Niblo, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. 1925. & Wyler, *Ben-Hur*. 1959. & Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. 2016.

They might very well perceive him as someone who was pampered and traveled their entire life or as someone who worked at a church—Jesus being the holy child and all. Additionally, the 2016 film has Jesus incorrectly working alone as a carpenter in Jerusalem⁵⁰ rather than in Nazareth at his father Joseph’s carpentry shop⁵¹. This is especially important because the mid-1920’s began a decline in religious devotion in the United States that persisted into the mid-1930’s.⁵² With less religious knowledge, incorrect context could make people’s perceptions of the narrative and history messy.

The last biblical aspect of these three films to address is the trial, death, and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. All three films again follow the New Testament in that Jesus is tried by Judea’s governor Pontius Pilate, the people call for his crucifixion, and he is paraded through the streets and crucified leading to darkness and earthquakes.⁵³ Each film has its own subtle differences to the story and unique parts that they get right and wrong compared to the others.

Only the 1925 film shows that crowds did not follow and witness the crucifixion and that the Romans cast lots for Jesus’ garments afterwards, sitting and rolling dice for who got what.⁵⁴ In comparison, the 1959 and 2016 films show a crowd following the Roman procession and remaining until after the crucifixion.⁵⁵ This likely did not happen since there is no mention of any witnesses to the crucifixion besides the centurions who did it and it would have caused a security risk if a large crowd decided to attack the centurions.

⁵⁰ Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. 2016.

⁵¹ Joseph was a carpenter as well. Matt. 13:55.

⁵² Robert T. Handy. “The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935.” *Church History* 29, no. 1 (1960): 3-16.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3161613>.

⁵³ Matt. 27:1-54.

⁵⁴ Niblo, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. 1925.

⁵⁵ Wyler, *Ben-Hur*. 1959. & Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. 2016.

The 1959 film is unique in showing Pontius Pilate's symbolic and quite literal washing his hands of the ordeal and placing the blood of Jesus on the Jewish masses.⁵⁶ This important aspect is missing from the other two films and provides a striking discrepancy. While this narrative is what the Bible pushes⁵⁷, it is highly likely to have been a later fabrication from when Christianity became the official religion of Rome sometime around or after 380 CE. Rome would not have liked the idea of someone calling themselves "King of the Jews" and people claiming he would save them from Roman control, threatening both the emperor and peace.⁵⁸ Rome was definitely unfond of Christianity and Christ as shown by Tacitus describing it as a "mischievous superstition" and "evil".⁵⁹ There is no reason why Pilate would have tried to save him and argue with the crowd as he does in Matthew 27⁶⁰; he would have wanted Jesus gone.

The 2016 film, by comparison, gets something smaller than the other two uniquely correct which leads to an interesting trend. In the 1925 and 1959 films, Jesus carries the entire cross through the streets before being nailed to it.⁶¹ However, modern scholarship seems to lean more towards Jesus having only carried the crossbeam of the crucifix.⁶² The reasoning for this is that Seneca in *Epistles* CI describes how prisoners would be fixed to the crossbeam before ever being mounted to the cross itself.⁶³ In the 2016 film, Jesus does just this, carrying only the crossbeam on his shoulders albeit not being fixed to it. I would like to use this fact to introduce a trend with the films mentioned in this chapter.

⁵⁶ Wyler, *Ben-Hur*. 1959.

⁵⁷ Matt. 27:24.

⁵⁸ Peter J. Tomson, *Presumed Guilty: How the Jews Were Blamed for the Death of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005): 57, 74-75. <https://archive.org/details/presumedguiltyho0000toms/mode/1up>.

⁵⁹ Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*. 15.44. [Trans. Church].

⁶⁰ Matt. 27:21-24.

⁶¹ Niblo, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. 1925. & Wyler, *Ben-Hur*. 1959.

⁶² Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. 2016.

⁶³ Seneca, *Epistles*. Volume III, Letter 101. [Trans. Ben Schneider].

Simply based on the *Clash of the Titans* and *Ben-Hur* films, it seems that there is a trend of modern movies getting the overall story less correct (*Ben-Hur* 2016 is significantly changed from earlier iterations) but smaller details closer than their predecessors. *Clash of the Titans* (2010) gets smaller aspects about Perseus and Medusa right and *Ben-Hur* (2016) gets smaller aspects like Jesus' portrayal as a normal human being and carrying only the cross section of the cross correct. The 2016 *Ben-Hur* film is also the only one to show Jesus healing a leper earlier in the movie, Longinus stabbing Jesus with a spear, and outright saying this occurs in 33 AD.⁶⁴ These are not important details integral to the story or knowledge of Jesus, but their inclusion is interesting. Perhaps this is due to changes in historical and religious knowledge over time, but I will inquire into this in Chapter 7. I would also like to address the legendary aspects of "The Old Testament" skit from *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I*, but I will save that for its more fitting place in Chapter 4.

⁶⁴ Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. 2016.

CHAPTER 3: SWORD-AND-SANDALS

Caesar and Cleopatra (1945), *Spartacus* (1960), *Julius Caesar Against the Pirates* (1962), *The Fall of Rome* (1963), *Clash of the Titans* (1981), *Gladiator* (2000), *Alexander* (2004), *300* (2006), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014)

Before getting into the main point of this chapter, I want to address what exactly a “sword and sandals” film is. While these films are typically regarded as synonymous with Italian *peplum*, strongman films from the 1960s, *peplum* are Italian-made by Italian directors so “sword and sandals” is a better and more encompassing term for the films I will discuss in this chapter. The name for these films originates from the swords and sandals that the characters in them would usually brandish, originating from the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome. From these areas’ histories, usually great epics of wars and heroics are pulled—their popularity changing the genre of the “ancient world on film” into the “ancient world in epic film”.⁶⁵ Through watching the films listed above, several shared tropes can be observed. These are: the main character being a larger-than-life legendary hero, the main character needing a love interest and/or damsel in distress, the main character experiencing a fall from grace and a comeback, and the need for a “big bad”. While some of these aspects may be accurate to history, they usually embellish and exaggerate certain aspects of a figure or events or outright change them—especially events.

In *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945) and *Julius Caesar Against the Pirates* (1962), we see two starkly different Caesars. In the former, Caesar is depicted closer to historical accounts as the “hero of Rome” and a great military man that does nothing more powerful than in recorded history

⁶⁵ Sylvie Magerstädt, *TV Antiquity: Swords, Sandals, Blood, and Sand* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019): 4-5.

besides carrying Cleopatra through the ocean⁶⁶ rather than papers and his cape⁶⁷. In the latter film, we see a much younger and more vengeful Caesar that acts more like a pirate than a Roman soldier. Rather than being released on ransom and returning to capture the pirates who captured him⁶⁸, he escapes and takes soldiers back to slaughter and burn the entire encampment then and there⁶⁹. He did eventually kill all of them through crucifixion according to Plutarch⁷⁰, but not through a murderous and fiery rampage like a marauder. He also single-handedly takes down the pirates' leader, Haymar—who was never named in historical records nor is recorded as fighting Caesar directly—in a fight for his wife⁷¹, portraying him as the typical *peplum* strongman. Comparison of these two films is a good example of how a strongman can be portrayed accurately or be absorbed by the genre.

Another good comparison can be made between the two *300* films. *300* (2006) follows Leonidas, king of the Spartans and the leader of three-hundred Spartans along with some other Greeks against the Persian armies of Xerxes at Thermopylae. The film does not do anything excessive with his feats of glory besides taking down an “Uber Immortal”—basically an ogre—and throwing a spear at Xerxes before he and his army are slaughtered⁷².⁷³ This allows the rest—his going against tradition with the Carneia and trying to inspire the Greek city-states to come together in the battle against Xerxes⁷⁴—to be accurate to the historical record. Contrary to this fact, we have *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014) which follows the Athenian politician and general

⁶⁶ Gabriel Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. December 11, 1945; Gabriel Pascal Productions, 1945.

⁶⁷ Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar*. 64 [Trans. Thayer].

⁶⁸ Plutarch, *The Life of Julius Caesar*. 2-4 [Trans. Thayer].

⁶⁹ Sergio Grieco, *Julius Caesar Against the Pirates*. April 23, 1962; C.A.P.R.I., 1962.

⁷⁰ Plutarch, *Julius Caesar*. 2 [Trans. Thayer].

⁷¹ Grieco, *Julius Caesar Against the Pirates*. 1962.

⁷² Leonidas was not among the last to die, his body was fought over between his men and the Persians. Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc., 2002): 313-314.

⁷³ Zack Snyder, *300*. December 9, 2006; Legendary Pictures, 2006.

⁷⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 7. 207. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

Themistocles and his plight against the Persian invasion—primarily against Xerxes’ naval commander, Artemisia—starting with Marathon and ending with the Battle of Salamis.⁷⁵

Themistocles’ role in this film is heavily embellished to make him an equal to Leonidas in the preceding film. He was never a great hero like how the film depicts him. He did not kill King Darius, nor did King Darius die in that battle—he and Xerxes were not even there⁷⁶. He also did not ride a horse over ships at the battle of Salamis or kill Artemesia. In fact, she escaped to and lived in Persia after the war.⁷⁷ Themistocles is never described as the great warrior that appears in the film and especially did not get an entire fleet of Spartans that comes to his losing aid in the film either. There were less than twenty-six Lacedaemonian, not necessarily Spartan, ships used for between Artemesium and Salamis⁷⁸. He also looked heavily different than in the film. He was not a handsome, amazingly heroic warrior. Rather, Themistocles was a more round-faced man⁷⁹ that did command the Athenian navy at Artemesium and Salamis⁸⁰ but is not recorded as being any kind of great fighter in these nor having relations with Artemisia⁸¹ (more on that later). Again, one can see how the needs of an action film can taint the historical record by blowing a history of “great men” out of proportions to even greater men.

Some other examples of historical figures turned into larger-than-life heroes appearing in these films are as follows. In *Spartacus* (1960), Spartacus is depicted as, as Plutarch states, “of great courage and strength”⁸², but with a much more righteous cause and personification. He is

⁷⁵ Noam Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. March 4, 2014; Legendary Pictures, 2014.

⁷⁶ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 7. 103-121. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

⁷⁷ Polyaeus, *Stratagems*. Book 8. 53. [Trans. R. Shepherd].

⁷⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 8. 1, 44, 49. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

⁷⁹ *Themistocles*. Marble. 1st-2nd century recreation of 5th century original, (Museo Archeologico Ostiense, Ostia, Rome, Italy), from <https://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=8476>.

⁸⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 8. 5, 86. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

⁸¹ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

⁸² Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*. 8 [Trans. Thayer].

presented as an almost undefeatable warrior and leader whose goal is only to get his freed people out of Italy, eventually ending his life on the cross with the survivors of his final battle as a martyr to his wife and son.⁸³ In the historical record, Spartacus was defeated several times and his body was never found.⁸⁴ His strict rule is also never shown—such as when he crucified a Roman prisoner between his and the Roman forces as a warning to the enemy and as a warning to his own men of what would happen if they lost⁸⁵—because to modern audiences it would make him seem less heroic and more barbaric.

In *Clash of the Titans* (1981 and 2010) we see Perseus understandably depicted as extraordinarily strong and powerful, being a demigod in both. In the 1981 film, however, as discussed previously, Perseus is made much more heroic and righteous to make him appear more as a hero and not the selfish young man the legend and 2010 film present him as. Another “strongest man” is Maximus from *Gladiator* (2000). Though not a historical figure, he becomes quite literally the strongest when he defeats gladiator after gladiator until he is able to fight and kill Emperor Commodus despite a stab to the chest beforehand.⁸⁶ Alexander the Great in *Alexander* (2004) is somewhat of an exception to the “strongest man” trope. Despite being “the Great” and one of the strongest men in history, the film presents him as flawed in several ways interspersed with great battles and him voicing his desires for the spread and intertwining of cultures and connecting the whole world. He is shown to be a drunkard, almost consumed by conquest, having daddy issues, making many mistakes, and killing his friends throughout.⁸⁷ Of course, with the hero comes something, or someone, that needs saving.

⁸³ Stanley Kubrick, *Spartacus*. October 6, 1960; Bryna Productions, 1960.

⁸⁴ Plutarch, *Crassus*. 8.

⁸⁵ Appian, *The Civil Wars*. 119 [Trans. Thayer].

⁸⁶ Ridley Scott, *Gladiator*. May 1, 2000; DreamWorks Pictures, 2000.

⁸⁷ Oliver Stone, *Alexander*. November 16, 2004; Warner Bros. Pictures, 2004.

A few of these films depart from the love interest and damsel in distress trope because they did not exist in the historical record and would serve no purpose. They are absent from *Gladiator*, *Alexander*, *300*, and *300: Rise of an Empire*. There could be arguments made that there is a love interest as a plot point in *Gladiator* and *300: Rise of an Empire*, but this is not the case. In the former, Commodus' sister Lucilla has feelings for Maximus, but this is not reciprocated since he only wishes for revenge against her brother and has a (deceased) wife and son.⁸⁸ In the latter, Themistocles has a sexual affair with Artemisia and holds her in high regard, but this is simply a show of dominance, power, and respect for her naval skills.⁸⁹

300 and *300: Rise of an Empire* are also different from the other films I have discussed because they have women solely in strong roles as queens (Queen Gorgo) and commanders (Artemisia). They also accurately show the recorded strength of each. Queen Gorgo speaks up against the Persian messenger, as she was known to do to several people,⁹⁰ and Artemisia speaks up to Xerxes and against his command when no men, being the sole female commander, will⁹¹. This is a large contrast compared to the other women in this film genre. A good thing to note though, is that Queen Gorgo did not rule after Leonidas died. Their son, Pleistarchus, who was too young at the time, had his cousin Pausanias as regent.⁹² In fact, Leonidas was not even the sole king and did not have complete power. Sparta at the time was ruled by two kings—Leonidas and Leotychidas⁹³—whose powers were limited by a council/senate of thirty elders called the *Gerousia* that were really in control and that the kings themselves were a part of⁹⁴.

⁸⁸ Scott, *Gladiator*. 2000.

⁸⁹ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

⁹⁰ Snyder, *300*. 2006. and Plutarch, *Sayings of Spartan Women*. Gorgo 4-6. [Trans. Thayer].

⁹¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 8, 68-70. [A.D. Godley, Ed.].

⁹² "Pleistarchus." *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*. [Trans. William Smith].

⁹³ Cartledge. 129.

⁹⁴ Cartledge. 68-70.

The figures that appear as love interests and damsels in distress in the other films are Cleopatra in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Spartacus' wife Varinia in *Spartacus*, Haymar's wife Claudia in *Julius Caesar Against the Pirates*, the barbarian Svetla in *The Fall of Rome*, Andromeda in *Clash of the Titans* (1981), and Io in *Clash of the Titans* (2010). In *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra serves as Caesar's target of affection and in need of his protection at times, such as when he carries her on his back through the ocean, but also very conniving behind his back. While she is much more than a simple attraction in this film, the majority seems to focus on her affection for Caesar and want for a man.⁹⁵ I will dive into this further in chapter 6 because this is an integral part of Cleopatra's on-screen depictions.

Spartacus' wife Varinia is a fitting example of the creation of a damsel in distress—albeit for the first half of the film and not an end goal. After he meets her at the gladiator training camp, she is sold and brought to Rome when Spartacus and his comrades break free. As he travels the countryside recruiting slaves and other stragglers, he eventually finds Varinia again. They then have a child together and, after he is captured, Spartacus lives on the cross until he can see the two of them alive again. A large part of his reason for fighting is for the freedom of his wife and child.⁹⁶ However, Spartacus' wife, as recorded by Plutarch, was quite different. Historically, Spartacus' wife was a nameless prophet from the same Thracian tribe who also escaped with him⁹⁷—not an educated Britannian⁹⁸. Her story was completely changed to create a love story with repeated separation, reunion, and the birth of a child that is not recorded having existed anywhere. Having the two separated until the events of the film allows this story to grow more naturally; however, it presents Spartacus' motivations throughout the film incorrectly. He never actually worried about

⁹⁵ Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945.

⁹⁶ Kubrick, *Spartacus*. 1960.

⁹⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*. 8 [Trans. Thayer].

⁹⁸ Kubrick, *Spartacus*. 1960.

finding his wife, rather his sole goals through his entire rebellion were freedom and victory against Rome⁹⁹. It once again softens his character to make him more human and like the typical *peplum* hero of the period.

In *Julius Caesar Against the Pirates*, we see Caesar fall for the pirate leader Haymar's wife, Claudia, while in captivity. While this is not out of character for Caesar—he did similarly fall for Cleopatra while married after all¹⁰⁰—and there is no proof whether it occurred, it would be a massively stupid move and unrealistic for it to occur in real life. Starting an affair with the wife of the man who captured you and outnumbers you tenfold is a death wish. Even having been quite cocky with his captors¹⁰¹, Caesar doing this would have been farfetched. It could only make sense in a movie where there must be a love interest and a fight over her as a final set piece at the end. It is also a stretch that Julius Caesar would fall in with a pirate, a criminal, and have himself associated with the “barbarians” when he was an aspiring politician and soldier and makes him look almost like a playboy. There is no reason to doing so here like with how Cleopatra was able to provide him an heir when Calpurnia could not.¹⁰² As is seen in *The Fall of Rome*, this is not good for one's image—especially when they are “enemies of Rome”.¹⁰³ Marcus falling in with the barbarian woman Svetla in this film is not as farfetched—her group nursed him back to health after his group was attacked and she consoled him after his wife was killed¹⁰⁴—but is still an unlikely occurrence. *The Fall of Rome* is a fictional tale, so some leeway needs to be given, but the historical accuracy and inaccuracy still needs to be questioned.

⁹⁹ Appian, *The Civil Wars*. 116-120. [Trans. Thayer].

¹⁰⁰ Duane W. Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography of Women in Antiquity* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 67.

¹⁰¹ Plutarch, *The Life of Julius Caesar*. 2. [Trans. Thayer].

¹⁰² Roller, 67, 70.

¹⁰³ Anthony Dawson, *The Fall of Rome*. February 28, 1963. Atlantica Cinematografica, 1963.

¹⁰⁴ Dawson, *The Fall of Rome*. 1963.

Since I have already discussed both *Clash of the Titans* films, I will quickly recap their damsel in distress/love interest aspects. In the 1981 film, Andromeda and Perseus are given a much deeper and longer connection than occurred in the original legend to create a love story about them and give Perseus a better motivation to save the damsel in distress from the Kraken.¹⁰⁵ In the 2010 film, Perseus is given the goddess Io as a love interest seemingly to distance him from Andromeda. Andromeda is still the damsel in distress to be sacrificed to the Kraken and saved by Perseus, but Perseus really only does this to get revenge against the gods and Hades.¹⁰⁶ Through these examples, one can see that in sword and sandals films, many women are put in simple roles of being a love interest or damsel in distress, sometimes in manners that do not make sense solely for plot purposes. Women that should have greater roles, like Cleopatra, are given lesser roles that do not give the nuance and power of their person justice (I will explain further in chapter 6). In comparison, we have the men who can fall into lower positions but almost always come back from it.

The fall from grace and ultimate comeback is a trope of heroic action movies that persists outside the sword-and-sandal genre even today. The best example of this is Rocky Balboa in *Rocky V*. In the final fight against his pupil, Tommy Gunn, Rocky is beaten almost to the point of death (it was supposed to be death¹⁰⁷) before getting back up and winning to a cheering crowd.¹⁰⁸ This concept of a loss and fall to rock bottom before getting back up for a victory is a staple of most sword-and-sandals films I have mentioned: *Spartacus*, *Julius Caesar Against the Pirates*, *The Fall*

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *Clash of the Titans*. 1981.

¹⁰⁶ Leterrier, *Clash of the Titans*. 2010.

¹⁰⁷ “Rocky Director Avildsen: Rocky Was Supposed to Die in Rocky V.” CBS News Philadelphia, March 10, 2014. <https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/rocky-director-avildsen-rocky-was-supposed-to-die-in-rocky-v/>.

¹⁰⁸ John G. Avildsen, *Rocky V*. November 16, 1990; United Artists, 1990.

of Rome, *Gladiator*, *Alexander*, *300*, *Clash of the Titans* (2010), and *300: Rise of an Empire*. In this group there is one exception and two special cases.

The exception to this trope is *Alexander* where only half of it, the fall from grace, occurs. Throughout this film, Alexander's character continuously deteriorates as he gains power and conquers until he is ultimately injured and forced to turn back. During this time he becomes a drunkard like his father and crazed from the deaths of his friends, both by his hands and by the hands of those who ultimately kill him in the end.¹⁰⁹ Alexander never has an ultimate comeback, rather he has small times of strength with his men between being depicted slipping further and further into drunkenness and madness (in part due to the multitude of conspiracies against him¹¹⁰ that the film mostly ignores). This is not entirely inaccurate because he was fond of drink, killed his friend¹¹¹, and went mad when Hephaestion died, crucifying his neglectful physician and waging war to deal with his grief¹¹² (another aspect that is absent from the film).

While this ignores that most of the time, especially towards the end of his life, he was not a mad drunk, it does present the messiness of humanity and the toll his conquests took on him in a better light than if the movie only presented him as a great king who conquered the world until he ultimately succumbed to what is believed to have been either malaria or typhoid fever¹¹³. It is not recorded that he had such great aspirations as further conquests of Italy, Arabia, and Egypt¹¹⁴ exactly, rather that he died crazed and in constant fear¹¹⁵. Some records of Alexander's goals that are similar do exist, though. Arrian record him as having goals of conquering Carthage, other

¹⁰⁹ Stone, *Alexander*. 2004.

¹¹⁰ Plutarch, *The Life of Alexander*. 75. [Trans. Thayer].

¹¹¹ Plutarch, *Alexander*. 50-52.

¹¹² Plutarch, *Alexander*. 72.

¹¹³ Burke A. Cunha, "The Death of Alexander the Great: Malaria or Typhoid Fever?" National Library of Medicine, accessed December 17, 2023. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15081504/>.

¹¹⁴ Stone, *Alexander*. 2004.

¹¹⁵ Plutarch, *Alexander*. 75.

coastal areas of the Mediterranean, and Arab territories.¹¹⁶ Diodorus records him having been preparing for a campaign against Carthage, the coast of Libya, and from the Iberian coast to Sicily.¹¹⁷ So while not necessarily accurate, the film does pick and choose from various sources what Alexander aspired for. Carthage was also probably changed to Rome to name a place that the audience would recognize easier. However, by not worrying about making Alexander a great hero and making a comeback, the film stays true to the messy life recorded by Plutarch more than the other films in this chapter.

The two special cases for this trope can be confusing because they use death—usually regarded as a hero’s failure in an action movie—as a “comeback” and ultimate victory. In *300*, Leonidas experiences a fall from grace when it is learned that the Persians found a path that will let them surround his group and, when he confronts Xerxes, he kneels. However, this is a fake out for his “comeback” where he is able to throw a spear and make the “god-king” bleed before dying a glorious death in battle for Sparta.¹¹⁸ This was not only a victory for Leonidas’ soul, but also a victory for all of Greece because, in the words of Leonidas, “[T]hey assassinate me, all of Sparta goes to war. Pray they’re that stupid. Pray we’re that lucky.”¹¹⁹ This was not exactly the case since Sparta still did not commit fully to the war for some time because they had to wait until after Carneia to move,¹²⁰ but it did give them more reason to fight and avenge their fallen king and men. For the film at least, the entire situation is fabricated to fit this trope in a way. However, it is just as true that this case is less like a fall from grace and comeback and rather that Leonidas overcomes adversity in the face of death depending on how you view the situation.

¹¹⁶ Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander*. 369-370, 407. [Trans. E. J. Chinnock].

¹¹⁷ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*. Book 28. 3.4. [Trans. Thayer].

¹¹⁸ Snyder, *300*. 2006.

¹¹⁹ Snyder, *300*. 2006.

¹²⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 7. 207. [Trans. Thayer].

In *Gladiator*, Maximus has his fall from grace both when he is put to death and when he is made a prisoner/gladiator. His comeback is when he is able to fight against Commodus in the arena, killing him, and getting to die himself and see his wife and son again in the afterlife. Also, on the topic of *Gladiator*, I want to address how emperor Commodus' life is butchered spare for a few facts like his cruelty¹²¹, incestual debauchery¹²², and favor for gladiatorial shows and fighting in them.¹²³ Commodus never killed his father, his other siblings besides Lucilla¹²⁴ are never mentioned, and he does not rule alongside his brother or father. The conflict is changed into a villainous evil dictator whose sole enemy is his sister and some senators¹²⁵ rather than a man who shared power and was not absolute for most of his career against several members of his own family.¹²⁶

It is important to note though that the depiction of Commodus as a villainous tyrant as he appears in *Historia Augusta*, Dio, and Herodian are not necessarily true. This idea is explored in Oliver Hekster's *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads*. In the book, he describes how all three are biased and feed off one another in their writing. Dio and *Historia Augusta* are extensively pro-senate and Herodian is more of a commentary on the child-emperors who plagued his time as well as being overly dramatized. They all were also written many years after Commodus reigned.¹²⁷ Throughout the rest of the book, Hekster makes it apparent that Commodus was actually well-liked by many corners of the Roman world. One example is that he had posthumous popularity among the praetorian guard of whom he started the tradition of having a strong bond

¹²¹ *The Life of Commodus*. *Historia Augusta*. 1 [Trans. Thayer]

¹²² *The Life of Commodus*. 5.

¹²³ *The Life of Commodus*. 15.

¹²⁴ *The Life of Commodus*. 1-2, 5, 17.

¹²⁵ Scott, *Gladiator*. 2000.

¹²⁶ *The Life of Commodus*. 4-5.

¹²⁷ Oliver Hekster, *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads* (Amsterdam; Gieben Publishers, 2002): 2-8.

with.¹²⁸ Another is that coinage also showed that many supported the idea of him being a superhuman victor like the Hercules he claimed to be reincarnated and presented him with honors not given to any previous emperors.¹²⁹

The games that Commodus enacted, the *Kommodeia*, also continued in many places well into the third century CE.¹³⁰ Septimius Severus even deified him after the senate issued him *damnato memoriae* (damned memory) in an attempt to clear his name too—even calling himself *Divi Commodi Frater* (Brother of the God, Commodus) as well.¹³¹ It is thanks to the senatorial class that we have such a negative view of the emperor. Hekster states that “[T]hose responsible for Commodus’ death had to portray a monster in order to defend their own rule”¹³², alluding to how anti-senate Commodus was. This is why it is widely regarded that Commodus was “more savage than Domitian, more foul than Nero”.¹³³ So while his insanity based on regarding himself as Hercules and fighting as a gladiator are generally agreed upon¹³⁴, it is not on any trustworthy basis that he was an evil, villainous tyrant in the way our sources and *Gladiator* present. It is simply a result of propaganda similar to how Cleopatra is remembered (more on that in chapter 6).

Back to the fall from grace and comeback, typically, when they occur, they are erroneous to history (when they are historical at all). Spartacus falls when he is captured and crucified, and his “comeback” is learning that he succeeded in making at least his wife and son free.¹³⁵ As previously stated, his body was never found, and it is unknown if his wife and/or son survived. Themistocles suffers his fall when his army is nearly wiped out by Artemisia at Artemisium,

¹²⁸ Hekster. 164-167.

¹²⁹ Hekster. 168, 173.

¹³⁰ Hekster. 174.

¹³¹ Hekster. 186.

¹³² Hekster. 202.

¹³³ Hekster. 197.

¹³⁴ Hekster. 2.

¹³⁵ Kubrick, *Spartacus*. 1960.

getting his comeback during the Battle of Salamis once he defeated her and the Spartans showed up with a multitude of ships.¹³⁶ In reality, the Greek fleet much more composed than the Persian fleet, won with what they had¹³⁷, and the Lacedaemonians (Spartans specifically are not mentioned in numbers) provided a total twenty-six ships used between both battles¹³⁸. The Spartans, especially not Queen Gorgo, never arrived in full force to save the day and the rest of the Greek city-state alliance led by Themistocles held its own quite well to the point that Artemisia tucked tail and fled¹³⁹—not killed by Themistocles.

Sword-and-sandal films also typically blow out of proportion a “big bad” to pose as an overarching villain throughout the film. Sometimes this is accurate. Ptolemy’s forces were Caesar’s ultimate enemy, Haymar would have been Caesar’s main target as the pirate leader, Alexander was his own biggest enemy, and Xerxes was the imposing “god king” that threatened all of Greece. By contrast, some other threats are heavily exaggerated or even added in. In the *Clash of the Titans* films, we see, as I have addressed, the additions of Calibos, the Goddess Hera, and Hades—the former two of which did not even appear in the Perseus legends and the latter was supposed to help Perseus. There was never a singular big bad in the original mythos of Perseus, rather several foes that he dealt with with no overarching cause like a god or goddess. The Kraken was, again, also heavily exaggerated and blown up into a *kaiju* rather than a simple sea serpent in the 2010 film.

In *300: Rise of an Empire*, though a formidable foe and “main enemy” of the early Greco-Persian war up to and including the Battle of Salamis, Artemisia was never the main villain she is

¹³⁶ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹³⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 8. 41-97. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

¹³⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 8. 1, 44, 49. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

¹³⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 8. 88-89. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

made out to be in the film. The film creates for her a backstory where her family was murdered by Greeks, leading her to be abandoned. About to die on the streets, at thirteen years-old she was raised and trained to be one of the strongest and most feared warriors in the Persian empire under Darius I. When he died, she cleaned the palace of Xerxes' allies and manipulated him into becoming the "god king" and continuing the Greek campaign where she would become the arch enemy of Themistocles—leading him to kill her in a one-on-one battle.¹⁴⁰ In reality, Artemisia was the queen of Halicarnassus and voluntarily joined Xerxes' expedition—not distinguishing herself until the Battle of Salamis¹⁴¹ where she fought and fled¹⁴². She never had any evil upbringing or rivalry with Themistocles and was not pulling the strings behind Xerxes throughout the war. The only reasoning for this is for the sake of the movie since—as I will address in the next chapter—this is not an aspect adapted from the *300* and *Xerxes* comic book source material.

Through these examples, one can see how the tropes of sword and sandal films can often accurately portray history but also how they can easily take over and change some aspects creating negative ripples in historical memory. We see figures forming relationships that they never had, siding with factions that would never occur, and enemies that never existed or that did and were made into supervillains. The issue this causes is that it makes history look like love stories where it is always a fight of good versus evil and continues the idea of a "history of great men and some women". No one is simply "good" or "evil"—especially in history where everything is interpretive. Many of these main characters are blown out of proportion to fit this. Themistocles and Perseus were not nearly as heroic as depicted and Artemisia and Hades were never the great plotting villains these films make them out to have been.

¹⁴⁰ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹⁴¹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*. Book 3, chapter 11.3. [Trans. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod].

¹⁴² Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 8. 88-89. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

You also miss out on things like Julius Caesar having a child with Cleopatra while in Egypt in *Caesar and Cleopatra* in part likely because Caesar had to play the hero to Cleopatra's damsel in distress who plotted as a kind of sub-villain behind the scenes. History can be action packed but it is not an action movie as these films typically present. They can be epic like *300* and *Alexander* but there will always be things like a villain, love, and action that the audience expects from a film—more on that in chapter 8. Chapter 8 will also contain something visible in this chapter in that newer films, like the *300* duology and *Clash of the Titans* (2010), depart from the stereotypical damsel and love-interest roles of females from the early to mid-twentieth century.

History is a story with characters, plots, and settings, but it is not a story in the traditional sense and is very complicated and connected with events throughout the human timeline and the planet. If people start to see historical figures as only characters, then they will start to treat them as such, rather than as people who actually existed. This could compound into events in historical stories becoming more exaggerated and changed to fit narratives using the characters for more than just their own stories. We see this in *Julius Caesar Against the Pirates* and *Clash of the Titans* (2010) where Julius Caesar and Perseus' stories are changed to fit a separate narratives where them and their characters can fit the tropes and ideas people would have expected of films during that period. Persistence and repetition of these portrayals and tropes can negatively affect historical memory when inaccuracies create an “entertainment historical record” in people's minds separate from, or overwriting, what is actually recorded and believed by historians.

CHAPTER 4: THEATRE AND TEXT ON FILM

Julius Caesar (1908), *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945), *Julius Caesar* (1950), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *300* (2006), *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), *Ben-Hur* (2016)

As I described in chapter 1, the early days of film were dotted with adaptations of plays such as William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and novels like Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. This tradition continued in the filmed media genre to modern day with adaptations like *In Cold Blood*¹⁴³, *Schindler's List*¹⁴⁴, and the 2016 adaptation of *Ben-Hur*. In terms of history, the accuracy of the source material often determines the accuracy of the adaptation and can set restrictions upon it as such. This could be due to factors of audience and even changes in education between writers. Additionally, as with sword and sandals films, there are once again certain expectations for these adaptations to be faithful to the source material or even to fix errors—the choice of which is up to the production team whose goal is ultimately to do whatever they think will attract and please audiences most. The shortcomings of the originals' abilities to translate into films can also be factors in how adaptations are created and presented. However, oftentimes the biggest changing factor in adapting to film is the vision of the director and what they want from the story.

The *300* duology which adapts Frank Miller's *300* and *Xerxes* comic books are, as I have already addressed, not completely accurate. For that matter, the source comics are not either. To make things simpler, I will analyze Zack Snyder and Noam Murro's changes for the films separately than Frank Miller's base stories, especially for the original *300*. In addressing the first

¹⁴³ Richard Brooks, *In Cold Blood*. December 15, 1967; Pax Enterprises, Inc., 1967. Based on the novel by Truman Capote.

¹⁴⁴ Steven Spielberg, *Schindler's List*. December 15, 1993; Amblin Entertainment & Universal Pictures, 1993. Based on the novel *Schindler's Ark* by Thomas Keneally.

film, it is unique in that it, along with the *300* comic, is known to have intentional inaccuracies. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, Frank Miller stated the following:

“The inaccuracies, almost all of them, are intentional. I took those chest plates and leather skirts off of them for a reason. I wanted these guys to move and I wanted ‘em to look good. I knocked their helmets off a fair amount, partly so you can recognize who the characters are. Spartans, in full regalia, were almost indistinguishable except at a very close angle. Another liberty I took was [that] they all had plumes, but I only gave a plume to Leonidas to make him stand out and identify him as king. I was looking for more an evocation than a history lesson. The best result I can hope for is that if the movie excites someone, they’ll go explore the histories themselves because the histories are endlessly fascinating.”¹⁴⁵

The goal of the comic, and the film by extension, was never to present a truly accurate history, but a product that channels a historical narrative into entertainment that might inspire readers to learn the bigger truth behind it. Miller also had to walk the line of what audiences could handle. In the same interview he talks about how he actually had to tone down the cruelty of the Spartans to make them bigger heroes and digestible for modern audiences—omitting them being the largest slave owners in Greece and Leonidas more realistically laughing and kicking Ephialtes off of the cliff.¹⁴⁶ Another thing that Miller had to change—or rather add—is the character Dilios. Dilios never existed in history and only serves to witness and tell the story of the Spartans as a narrator throughout the film, spreading the tale of the 300 Spartans throughout Greece and history.¹⁴⁷ Any inconsistencies and changes to history that occurred in Frank Miller’s *300* comic, with the film being a near one-to-one adaptation thanks to Zack Snyder’s love for the material, would be doomed to recur on screen. However, even with Miller’s changes, the story is still full

¹⁴⁵ Frank Miller, “How ‘300’ went from the page to the screen.” Interview by Steve Daly, *Entertainment Weekly*, March 13, 2007. <https://ew.com/article/2007/03/13/how-300-went-page-screen/>.

¹⁴⁶ Miller, “How ‘300’ went from the page to the screen.”

¹⁴⁷ The Tenth Art, “300: March to Glory ‘Frank Miller Interview’.” YouTube Video, 9:58, July 19, 2020. https://youtube.com/watch?v=UUoieg_390M.

of small historical references and details that would go unnoticed by the average viewer, speaking to the knowledge of the two men.

In an interview regarding the video game *300: March to Glory*, Frank Miller talks about how he made it a point to show the Spartan soldiers spending time on their hair and wearing red capes.¹⁴⁸ This is because these were aspects that would typically make you easily grabbable and killed but that the Spartans used for intimidation because of that.¹⁴⁹ In reality, Spartans would actually have discarded said capes.¹⁵⁰ The large “Spartan pit” (termed by fans) in the middle of the city¹⁵¹—which never actually existed—is directly correlated to records of the Spartans and Athenians having thrown Xerxes’ messengers into a pit for death-sentenced criminals by the former and into a well by the latter.¹⁵² Additionally, *300* also closely quotes Leonidas saying something along the lines of “[E]at a hearty breakfast, as tonight we shall dine in Hades”¹⁵³ with “eat your breakfast and eat hearty for tonight we dine in hell”¹⁵⁴.

In stark contrast to the base story, the film serves mostly to add large historiographical inconsistencies to Frank Miller’s narrative. A positive change is that he changed the Spartans walking around the city-state nude¹⁵⁵—that would only occur for pankration¹⁵⁶. The most damning change, however, is the addition of supernatural creatures like the ogre that Leonidas fights during

¹⁴⁸ Cartledge. 72-73.

¹⁴⁹ The Tenth Art, “300: March to Glory ‘Frank Miller Interview’.”

¹⁵⁰ John Gibson Warry, *Warfare in the Classical World: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Weapons, Warriors, and Warfare in the Ancient Civilizations of Greece and Rome* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma, 1995): 47.

¹⁵¹ Frank Miller, *300* (Dark Horse Books, Milwaukie, Oregon, 1998): 7. and Snyder, *300*. 2006.

¹⁵² Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 7. 134. [Trans. A.D. Godley].

¹⁵³ Cartledge. 312.

¹⁵⁴ Miller, *300*. 33. & Snyder, *300*. 2006.

¹⁵⁵ Miller, *300*. 6-7.

¹⁵⁶ Images from Stella Nenova, “Pankration.” World History Encyclopedia, February 9, 2016. <https://www.worldhistory.org/pankration/>.

the battle with the Immortals.¹⁵⁷ Said ogre was not present in the comic book and was a fantastical addition that spread into the second film's story as well. Another change that Zack Snyder made for the first film adaptation is Queen Gorgo's narrative back in Sparta. There is no record of such events having occurred and the reason he added it was to expand on and show what Leonidas was fighting for¹⁵⁸—not because of any historical context surrounding the situation or the queen. It is really in the second film that a director's changes and the effects of the film medium can be observed.

The first two issues of Frank Miller's *Xerxes* serve as the basis for *300: Rise of an Empire*. In these issues, the battle of Marathon and a following battle at Athens immediately after leading to Darius' death and Xerxes' deification occur.¹⁵⁹ It is from these events that Noam Murro changed things both for better and worse. The positive changes are that the invasion of Athens was removed, the death of Darius was moved to Marathon, and Themistocles was given less valor at Marathon.¹⁶⁰ While Darius did not die there—rather later on from conspiracy¹⁶¹—it makes more sense to occur at Marathon rather than an invasion of Athens that never occurred. Additionally, at the battle of Marathon, Themistocles is described as a “little known Athenian soldier”¹⁶² rather than the “Leader of Men”¹⁶³ that the comic portrays him as. He is just as skilled as, if not more skilled than the comic interpretation of him, but this is understandable because he had to be to earn leadership over the forces under Miltiades. While smaller details are heavily erroneous in this film, the basic

¹⁵⁷ Snyder, *300*. 2006.

¹⁵⁸ Miller, “How ‘300’ went from the page to the screen.”

¹⁵⁹ Frank Miller, *Xerxes*. Issues #1&2; (Dark Horse Books, Milwaukie, Oregon, 2019).

¹⁶⁰ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹⁶¹ George S, Goodspeed, “The Persian Empire from Darius to Artaxerxes.” *The Biblical World* 14, no. 4 (1899): 255. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3137146>.

¹⁶² Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹⁶³ Miller, *Xerxes*. Issue #1. p.4.

timeline of events is relatively intact—a trend that has been established across previous chapters and especially for newer films.

The film's issues start with the Battle of Marathon. The comic presents many things historically accurate that the film changes for the opposite. As I have already addressed, Themistocles did not look the way that he does in the film. In the *Xerxes* comic, however, he does appear accurate to physical sources as a round-faced older man with a large beard.¹⁶⁴ The other big change is to Xerxes' backstory. In the comic, all that is shown of his becoming the "God-King" is him coming across a bandaged figure in the desert after his father is killed by the fictional Aeskylos¹⁶⁵ (rather than Themistocles in the film). In the film, we see Darius die from his wound in Persia, soon after which Artemisia begins her manipulation of Xerxes into becoming the "God-King" by dipping into a magical glowing pool of gold.¹⁶⁶ Artemisia never had such influence in the comic nor in the historical record—in fact she is never even mentioned in either *300* or *Xerxes*. Xerxes being the "God-King" and believing it himself also is a notion original to the Frank Miller books with the term being a reference to how Persian subjects kneeled for their kings contrary to Greeks¹⁶⁷.

Another negative change that could be seen as positive at first glance is that Murro removed the Greeks using Greek Fire against the Persians as they did in *Xerxes* issue 2¹⁶⁸. Greek Fire was a weapon of the Eastern Roman Empire¹⁶⁹, not necessarily the Greeks themselves. Fire-based

¹⁶⁴ Image of a bust from Mark Cartwright, "Themistocles." World History Encyclopedia, March 3, 2016. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Themistocles/>.

¹⁶⁵ Miller, *Xerxes*. Issue #2. p.12-13.

¹⁶⁶ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹⁶⁷ Plutarch, *The Life of Themistocles*. 27. [Trans. Thayer].

¹⁶⁸ Miller, *Xerxes*. Issue #2. p22.

¹⁶⁹ Adrienne Mayor, *Greek Fire, Poison Arrows, and Scorpion Bombs: Biological and Chemical Warfare in the Ancient World* (Princeton University Press; Princeton, NJ, 2022): 96-97. eBook through hoopla.

weapons were used around this time—such as flaming arrows and crude flamethrowers¹⁷⁰—and Murro took advantage of that by giving the Persians oil as a flammable weapon in the battle of Artemisium¹⁷¹. There are known petroleum and other oil-based mixtures used in ancient history¹⁷², but they would not have been spewing from a large metal fortress-ship¹⁷³ that looks like The Raft from *Captain America: Civil War*¹⁷⁴. This scene also has the use of an ogre¹⁷⁵ repeating the error of the first film adding them.

Noam Murro's film does keep one of the surprising accuracies of Frank Miller's books. In both mediums, Athenian soldiers appear with no symbols like the Spartan lambda on their shields and with various weapons and helmets of all shapes and sizes with and without plumes. This is accurate as Athenians did not have a military uniform like Spartans, rather they supplied themselves¹⁷⁶ being of various occupations conscripted for service.¹⁷⁷ They did not have blue capes like in the movie though—that is to contrast against the Spartan red.

Although the *300* films are directly attached to the source materials, they—especially the second—are their own entities that evoke history in different ways. The way they each portray the Persian armies is interesting because Zack Snyder and Noam Murro take how Frank Miller presents them and adds onto it. In the comics, we see an army of immortals dressed almost like Japanese samurai with fearsome masks and full body armor and a Xerxes that is near-naked and

¹⁷⁰ Mayor. 21-22, 96-98.

¹⁷¹ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹⁷² Mayor. 22, 34.

¹⁷³ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹⁷⁴ Joe Russo and Anthony Russo, *Captain America: Civil War*. United States; Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2016.

¹⁷⁵ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹⁷⁶ John H. Kroll, "Some Athenian Armor Tokens." *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 46, no. 2 (1977): 144. <https://jstor.org/stable/147832>.

¹⁷⁷ David M. Pritchard, "Democracy and War in Ancient Athens and Today." *Greece & Rome* 62, no. 2 (2015): 143-144. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26333675>.

covered in gold jewelry. This could be seen as presenting how fearsome the Immortals and divine Xerxes appeared to the Greeks based on stories they heard of Xerxes' personal guard and the "God-King" more than simply distinguishing them from other Persians or making them look cooler. In this way, the comics and films may not so much be evoking history in these cases as much as the psychology of the characters they follow. This is somewhat alluded to when Themistocles falls into the water at Artemisium and we can see from his perspective imaginary sea monsters swallowing up his men and lunging at him¹⁷⁸.

While I have addressed how the *300* and *Xerxes* comics affected the *300* films, I have not talked about how the medium itself restricted what Snyder and Murro could do. Written texts give a lot more freedom to fabricate an image in one's mind than an illustrated comic book. Some things can be changed if they are unimportant. For example, again, Zack Snyder makes it so that the Spartans are not walking around Sparta nude—something that would have only been done for pankration. Other bigger imagery is a lot tougher such as Xerxes or Ephialtes' appearances. They likely looked nothing like how they appear in either the comic or the film—especially Xerxes—but because of how important and striking they both appear; those appearances must be carried over to the screen. This is especially true for Xerxes who would look like any other Persian besides his size and royal clothing. He was much less striking than the gold-decorated, near-nude, and hairless godlike figure Miller, Snyder, and Murro depict him as. It is important to note though, that while Noam Murro directed *300: Rise of an Empire*, Zack Snyder wrote the screenplay.¹⁷⁹

The length of the comics also contributes to how the films turned out. This is not exactly the case for *300* though, since it adapted all five issues of the comic book, only adding sixteen

¹⁷⁸ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

¹⁷⁹ "300: Rise of an Empire." Legendary. Accessed January 9, 2024. <https://www.legendary.com/film/300rise/>.

minutes of extra screentime. However, it is especially the case for the sequel. In order to continue the story of the Greeks from the *Xerxes* comics, a lot had to be added or else the film would have been only about fifteen to thirty minutes—much shorter than the final 102. Because of this, about ninety four percent of the film¹⁸⁰ is original material not adapted from any published work by Frank Miller. In this way, the film is not directly hindered by the contents of its source’s material, but by the lack thereof—opening the door to more inaccuracies by the film crew.

William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, in terms of his death, is relatively accurate to his recorded histories and consistent between the 1908 and 1950 film adaptations. There are a few narrative issues though with the public being upset Caesar did not accept a crown publicly and him saying “*et tu, Bruté?*”. The Roman people would not have liked the idea of having a monarchy rather than their republic. Caesar also would have actually said “you too, my child?”¹⁸¹ in Greek (καὶ σὺ τέκνον), not “and you, Brutus”. However, these issues are likely to serve narrative purposes. Having the Roman populace want Caesar as king and love him more makes him appear more likeable and gives bigger justification for their dissent at his death. Having Caesar speak in Latin simply makes it more understandable for sixteenth century England that likely would not have known Greek but still learned Latin. Another thing left out from the work is that some people were suspicious and thought Caesar wanted to die¹⁸², an important aspect when looking at the event of his death. This was likely left out to keep the theme of betrayal and consistency of infighting and plotting between high-ranking Romans being the issue.

Shakespeare himself attended a free grammar school open to all the neighborhood boys where he learned Latin by copying the works of Horace, Virgil, and likely Suetonius and

¹⁸⁰ 6/94 minutes are adapted from Frank Miller’s Work.

¹⁸¹ Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar*. 82. [Trans. Thayer].

¹⁸² Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar*. 86-87. [Trans. Thayer].

Plutarch.¹⁸³ It is unknown if he pursued any kind of higher education after being pulled out of school by his father¹⁸⁴, but it is unlikely since few other playwrights at the time did.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, this is important since there is a high chance that Shakespeare was well versed in historical texts by these authors and was quite knowledgeable in them. This then leaves the issue of changes to the medium: a play. Certain things need to be changed for quick understandability—audiences do not have time to stop and look up Greek terms or look deeper into something—and they must be presented in expressive ways that the audience can understand. These effects are much more visible in the 1908 adaptation where it is presented as if you are sitting in the gallery watching the play unfold in a much shorter amount of time. The 1950 adaptation moves away from this, adapting later film techniques to move away from being like a play, but still largely follows Shakespeare’s script and contains the same issues since it is still an adaptation of the same work.

Caesar and Cleopatra (1945) is adapted from a play by George Bernard Shaw written in 1898. The film starts with Julius Caesar meeting Cleopatra at the Sphynx.¹⁸⁶ This is not true as several sources, such as Diodorus and Plutarch, state that Cleopatra first met Caesar in Alexandria.¹⁸⁷ Later on, Caesar gets mad when he is given Pompey’s signet ring¹⁸⁸ when he is recorded instead receiving it upon his first arrival in Alexandria and crying over it as well¹⁸⁹. These moments are not explainable for any reasoning of drama or narrative purposes and simply serve Shaw’s wishes and what he wanted to show—the Sphynx especially shows that this is in Egypt

¹⁸³ Sidney Lee, *A Complete Biography of William Shakespeare* (General Press, New Delhi, India. 2018): Chapter 2, “Education.” eBook from hoopla.

¹⁸⁴ Lee, *A Complete Biography of William Shakespeare*. Chapter 2, “Withdrawal from School.”

¹⁸⁵ “Shakespeare’s School.” Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Art Council of England. Accessed January 30, 2024. <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/william-shakespeare/shakespeare-school/>.

¹⁸⁶ Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945.

¹⁸⁷ Roller, 61.

¹⁸⁸ Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945.

¹⁸⁹ Plutarch, *The Life of Pompey*. 80. [Trans. Thayer].

before even touching Cleopatra or Alexandria. However, there are several instances of changes made for the sake of the story.

One such change is that, in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra's fictional aid Ftateeta puts Pothinus to death¹⁹⁰ rather than Caesar.¹⁹¹ This is likely to make Cleopatra and her court more plotting and her into the bigger behind the scenes villains of the story. Another change is Cleopatra and Apollodorus' presence at the Battle of Pharos. In the film, Caesar jumps into the ocean and carries Cleopatra back to shore.¹⁹² According to Suetonius, when he jumped into the sea, he was pulling his cloak with his teeth and swam to shore while holding papers above the water to keep them out of enemy hands.¹⁹³ The reason for the change here is simple in that it helps grow the relationship between Caesar and Cleopatra, giving them a touching moment where he heroically carries her to safety.

The last important changes that are made are that, at the end of the film, Caesar makes Egypt into a province of Rome and that Cleopatra is not pregnant.¹⁹⁴ This was probably to make a connection between the two powers, solidify the connection between the leaders, and keep the debate surrounding Caesarion¹⁹⁵ and their child out of the picture. Not having any reference to Caesarion is not a huge deal but the part about Egypt being a province is erroneous for several reasons. Caesar did not want to make Egypt into a province since it had a history of rebellion¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945.

¹⁹¹ Plutarch, *The Life of Pompey*. 80.

¹⁹² Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945.

¹⁹³ Suetonius, *Julius Caesar*, 64.

¹⁹⁴ Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945.

¹⁹⁵ Roller, 67.

¹⁹⁶ Herodotus, *The Histories*. Book 7. 1. [Trans. A.D. Godley]. & William Clarysse, *The Great Revolt of the Egyptians (205-186 BCE)* (University of California, Berkeley; Berkeley, California, April 2004). <https://lib.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/files/TheGreatRevoltoftheEgyptians.pdf>. & J. G. Manning, *The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC* (Princeton University Press, November 22, 2009): 65, 75.

that he feared and wanted to avoid¹⁹⁷—it would only cost Rome to put down and having Cleopatra as an allied monarch would be much more beneficial. Cleopatra would never have allowed this either, as she would do anything for her kingdom's sovereignty and had a lot of pride in it.¹⁹⁸ It would only be upon her defeat at the hands of Octavian that Egypt would become part of the Roman Empire¹⁹⁹—not by the will of either his predecessor or its ruling monarch. Whatever the reasonings for these changes, they cause several issues that I will address later in this chapter.

These are the best examples of why these changes to history are important. Even something as small as the meeting at the Sphynx instead of at a military camp or inside the palace at Alexandria matters because of what they mean for historical memory. Bernard Shaw, like Shakespeare, would have learned from ancient writers like Plutarch and Suetonius. The issue with this is that these sources are full of misinformation propagated by Octavian in Rome against Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra in Alexandria. As I will describe in more detail in chapter 6, he led Cleopatra to be described as a bewitching seductress among many other negative lights.²⁰⁰ With this in mind, the propaganda's effects on recent centuries can be easily deduced. In the way that Cleopatra is portrayed here, one can see how her portrayal is heavily affected by Octavian propaganda with how seductive and almost evilly she is made out to be. This is especially the case with how romance-oriented the film is. The problem here is that it only serves to promulgate these inaccuracies to a wider audience. It is not just a matter of historical events being portrayed incorrectly, but more of a defamation case against Cleopatra and her world.

¹⁹⁷ Suetonius, *Julius Caesar*, 35.

¹⁹⁸ Roller, 142, 144, 146-147.

¹⁹⁹ Roller, 151.

²⁰⁰ Roller, 130.

Though I already compared the three film adaptations of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* and their accuracies to history in terms of its Biblical aspects, I have not addressed which of these are closely based in—and possibly bound by—the story of the original novel and even the Bible itself. In the *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* novel by Lew Wallace, the death of Christ is as follows. Jesus’ trial is not actually seen, rather the incident of Pilate washing his hands and the people condemning Jesus is relayed to Ben-Hur who is elsewhere. In the city, a crowd in Jerusalem calls out names to Jesus, mocking him, and calling for his crucifixion by the Roman administration. Soon after he is brought to a knoll to be crucified, continuously muttering “I am the resurrection and the life”. At this point, a soldier offers him a drink which he refuses before he is stripped and placed upon the cross. It is at this point he says “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” For the next three hours, people come and insult him under a darkened sky. It is then that he speaks his last words—“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit”—before shaking and letting out a scream, succumbing to death after only three hours on the cross.²⁰¹

It is hard to discuss how film adaptations of *Ben-Hur* were bound by the novel because they all have different takes on the story, and it binds each of them uniquely. In fact, the films actually seem to stray from it more than abide by it. They all follow the basic premise of Jesus getting condemned by the people, stripped, and hung to die on the cross muttering “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” as last words instead of the final quote in the novel (likely because it has a larger impact), but it is in between these events that make each uniquely accurate and inaccurate.

²⁰¹ Lewis Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Denmark: SAGA Egmont, 2019): p.988-989, 1004-1022. eBook from North Providence Union Free Library; North Providence, Rhode Island.

All three adaptations break away from the novel to show the carrying of the cross through the city. The 1925 adaptation of *Ben-Hur* is unique in showing the Roman guards playing a betting game in front of the three crucified men.²⁰² This is not present in any other adaptation or the original. The 1959 adaptation is unique in that it actually shows the trial of Jesus by Pontius Pilate²⁰³—an inaccuracy which I already addressed in chapter 2. What is surprising is that, once again, we see the 2016 film departing from inaccuracies of the source material—this time the novel rather than the New Testament—more than just presenting him as more of a human than a religious figure. Not only does it not show the trial that was likely falsified by later Romans, but it also adds Longinus stabbing Jesus in the side after his death.²⁰⁴ The absence of this is one way that the original novel binds the 1925 and 1959 adaptations more than the 2016 one.

Through these points, one can see that, contrary to previous examples in this chapter, in these instances, the films actually tend to add more accuracy than the novel could hold back inaccuracies. They each have their fair share of both, but the scale seems to tip in the accuracy direction. The one major error that exists in all three films and is taken from the novel is because it is a major plot point. The prefect of Judea that preceded Pontius Pilate, Valerius Gratus, was not murdered there. In fact, he simply left, opening the door for Pilate's reign over the region.²⁰⁵

The discussion of *Ben-Hur* opens the door for a key point of this chapter in that it shows that breaking away from the source material is possible. They all add new elements that make them accurate in their own ways, but the 2016 adaptation is especially important in how it changes the characterization of Jesus. These films are examples of how breaking away from the source material

²⁰² Niblo, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. 1925.

²⁰³ Wyler, *Ben-Hur*. 1959.

²⁰⁴ Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. 2016.

²⁰⁵ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*. Book 18. 29. [Trans. Whiston].

can be done right to make the stories more accurate. In comparison, *300: Rise of an Empire* is a great example of doing it wrong. The film had so much space to play with the world and try to move away from the inaccuracies of its predecessor. The majority of the film is original and not based on Frank Miller's published stories, yet it is still bound by *300*'s legacy. Rather than try to get rid of the ogres, it brings them back and leans into fantastical elements even further with giant, metal, oil-spewing ships and having Persians with floatation devices.²⁰⁶ The idea that sequels can be heavily bound and even lean into the errors of their predecessors is something that must be kept in mind when viewing films showcasing history.

It is even more important to know when films like these are based on the works of other, perhaps much older, writers. A writer in Shakespeare's time might not exactly know everything we do about a historical subject today. They also might not have been educated much in history if at all. In knowing the author and their background, it makes it easier to assess the reasonings behind any inaccuracies that occur. An example is my assessment of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in this chapter. In knowing that he learned Latin and basic language skills through the copying of writers such as Suetonius and Plutarch, it is safe to say that he likely had a good understanding of history. Through this, it can be surmised that many changes are for the sake of storytelling and drama. The medium the original works are in is also significant in this way. As adaptations of plays are bound by the drama they are meant to invoke, films based on comic books are bound by the imagery within them. If you have the *300* comic book in front of you when watching the film, you will notice that many scenes are direct recreations of the panels drawn by Frank Miller.

²⁰⁶ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

However, the medium of the source and the education of the original creator does not excuse the errors of these films. Like the changes in the other films I have mentioned throughout this paper, they still can have a heavy hand on changes to historical memory. This is especially the case for less well-known history. Many more people in the United States in the 1920's, 50's, and even 2010's would likely know at least the basic story of Jesus Christ more than they would the story of Julius Cesar or the Alexandrian War. In this way, these plays could, and have, only negatively pushed assumed beliefs about figures like Caesar and Cleopatra more than Jesus. This is especially the case for Cleopatra, who already had her character dragged through the mud by Octavian and whose character was changed heavily for the worse in filmed works—more on that in chapter 6. The same as any other work, the accuracy of films adapting from other works must be criticized hardly alongside the original works to prevent the negative changing of historical memory by them.

CHAPTER 5: THE COMEDIES AND SOCIAL CHANGES

Bewitched (1969), *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I* (1981), *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II* (2023), *Queen Cleopatra* (2023)

Turning history into comedy is not something new to the age of film. Comedy has come from history for centuries with a great example being Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* written and performed in 411 BCE.²⁰⁷ Comedy serves as a very useful way to convey history through a light-hearted medium but can easily fall short of teaching anything or being accurate if the creator leans too far into the comedy. The ultimate goal of comedy is not to teach, though—it is to make the audience laugh and be relatable. This relatability factor can also affect truthfulness because comedy must follow along with changes in the society its audience resides in. However, how truthful filmed comedy is still an important matter because it still imparts and can affect historical knowledge and memory. Overall, comedies will typically have a historically accurate shell with a more nuanced and malleable comedic interior. Popular examples of comedic history are in *Bewitched*, *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I*, and *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II*.

Season six episode three of the TV sitcom *Bewitched*, “Samantha’s Caesar Salad”, originally aired on October 2, 1969.²⁰⁸ The episode’s plot centralizes around the issue of the maid/nanny, Esmeralda, accidentally summoning Julius Caesar rather than a Caesar salad and the Stephens family’s struggles to return him to his time.²⁰⁹ Since this obviously does not follow any

²⁰⁷ Foley. 1-21.

²⁰⁸ “‘Bewitched’ Samantha’s Caesar Salad.” IMDb, accessed September 16, 2023.
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0523186/>.

²⁰⁹ Ed Jurist and Sol Saks, writers, *Bewitched*. Season 6, episode 3, “Samantha’s Caesar Salad.” Directed by William Asher. Aired October 2, 1969. ABC.

ancient events or take place in ancient Rome, I will only evaluate the characters based on historical figures—Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, and her attendants.

Caesar's depiction is somewhat questionable here. Physically, Caesar appears quite accurate to how he is recorded presenting himself. Besides having a full head of hair, they chose an actor that looks like depictions of Caesar from antiquity that still survive today. However, his clothing is quite different than how the real Caesar would have looked. Here he wears a short sleeved off-white tunic with red accents and jewelry on the shoulders. Underneath that is a sky-blue shirt with gold accents and intricate dark blue and red designs along the middle. The real Caesar was known to have worn a "senator's tunic with fringed sleeves reaching to the wrist... [with] a girdle over it"²¹⁰ and a purple (almost maroon) toga²¹¹. Caesar also appears here wearing metal arm cuffs which are not present on depictions of him from antiquity. His mannerisms, however, are quite accurate to how the man acted. He treats his allies with kindness and respect²¹² and presents himself in the dignified manner most high-ranking Romans or rulers would. He even swoons over Cleopatra exclaiming "Cleopatra, my love" with open arms when she is presented before him. The secrecy of their relationship is also commented upon when Caesar reads about it in a book, exclaiming: "Lived with Cleopatra... is nothing sacred?"

There are two inaccuracies in his actions, though. One is that he salutes with a straight arm, fingers together, and palm down—as the Nazis saluted. In his book, *The Roman Salute: Cinema, History, Ideology*, classical studies professor Martin M. Winkler states, "[N]ot a single Roman work of art—sculpture, coinage, or painting—displays a salute of the kind that is found in Fascism,

²¹⁰ Suetonius, *The Life of Julius Caesar*. 45.

²¹¹ Matthias Gelzer, *Caesar: Politician and Statesman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968): 321.

²¹² Suetonius, *Caesar*. 72.

Nazism, and related ideologies... never mentioned by ancient historians”.²¹³ Ancient Roman salutes would have constituted a raised arm in some way but would have had an open palm with the hand facing forward or sideways without needing the fingers together as evidenced by pieces on Trajan’s column²¹⁴. The second inaccuracy is that Caesar has gold sesterces. Roman sesterces were not gold, but silver²¹⁵—the gold coin after 211 BCE was the aureus²¹⁶.

In terms of Cleopatra, we do not learn anything about her character besides her being seductive and her connection with Julius Caesar. We can also tell that she is someone important based on her being held up on a sedan chair by what are likely four soldiers. This aspect is presumably accurate as it is not farfetched that an Egyptian queen would be held on a sedan chair as Queen Hetepheres was known to have one²¹⁷. In *Bewitched*, Cleopatra is very scantily dressed in sparkly gold clothes and jewelry with a headdress unlike any other depiction, artwork, or description of her. Depictions of her from antiquity show her having a royal diadem similar to a headband in sculptures²¹⁸, paintings²¹⁹, and coins²²⁰. It also would not have been unlikely for her to have a royal headdress in the shape of a vulture instead²²¹. Additionally, Cleopatra would likely have dressed much more conservatively as she is often depicted with more coverage in a dress-

²¹³ Martin M. Winkler, *The Roman Salute: Cinema, History, Ideology* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009): 2. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27815>.

²¹⁴ Winkler. 18-21.

²¹⁵ Liv Mariah Yarrow, *Roman Republic to 49 BCE: Using Coins as Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 34-37.

²¹⁶ Yarrow. 34-35, 147 figure 3.43.

²¹⁷ “Carrying chair of Queen Hetepheres I (reproduction).” Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accessed September 17, 2023. <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/148164/carrying-chair-of-queen-hetepheres-i-reproduction>.

²¹⁸ “Bust of Cleopatra.” World History Encyclopedia, April 26, 2012, accessed September 17, 2023. <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/318/bust-of-cleopatra/>.

²¹⁹ “Portrait of Cleopatra VII.” World History Encyclopedia, October 1, 2020, accessed September 17, 2023. <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/12822/portrait-of-cleopatra-vii/>.

²²⁰ “Tetradrachm (Coin) Portraying Queen Cleopatra VII.” The Art Institute of Chicago, accessed September 17, 2023. <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/194522/tetradrachm-coin-portraying-queen-cleopatra-vii>.

²²¹ Roller, 115.

like fashion at the Temple of Horus and Temple of Hathor²²². Cleopatra's age is also erroneously depicted here. While being depicted by a woman in her thirties, Cleopatra was only twenty-six years old when Julius Caesar died and should be that old or younger here—assuming she was taken from the same time as Caesar. Additionally, the filmmakers portrayed her skin color as a light-skinned Greek—being the daughter of the Greek Ptolemy XII²²³—rather than a darker-skinned Egyptian. However, spending time in the Egyptian Sun would have given her a tan unless she rarely went outside—which is possible—so it is debatable how historically accurate this really is. I will delve further into this issue in the next chapter.

The soldiers holding Cleopatra appear somewhat accurate to recorded depictions as well. They have dark skin as an Egyptian (being from Africa) typically would and a black and white striped cloth around their waists. While Egyptian prisoners have been recorded wearing this patterned cloth at one point²²⁴, soldiers have not. A plain white cloth would have been accurate to how they appear in hieroglyphs²²⁵. The other issue is with their black and white striped caps which are possibly mistaken from hair designs in hieroglyphs of soldiers²²⁶. The soldiers are also wearing breastplates which do not make an appearance in any depictions of Egyptian soldiers besides charioteers²²⁷. The use of soldiers in this context I also find questionable because I cannot think of a reason why the Egyptian queen would have soldiers rather than slaves carry her in such an

²²² Images from “Cleopatra.” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed September 17, 2023.
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cleopatra-queen-of-Egypt>.

²²³ Roller, 15.

²²⁴ “File: Suole Di Mummia Raffiguranti Due Prigionieri Asiatici BCH3158.Tif.” Wikimedia Commons, accessed September 16, 2023.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Suole_di_mummia_raffiguranti_due_prigionieri_asiatici_BCH3158.tif.

²²⁵ A quick Google Images search will prove this.

²²⁶ Jimmy Dunn, “The Military Man in Ancient Egypt.” Tour Egypt, accessed September 17, 2023.
<https://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/soldier.htm>.

²²⁷ Joshua J. Mark, “Ancient Egyptian Warfare.” World History Encyclopedia, October 3, 2016, accessed September 17, 2023. https://www.worldhistory.org/Egyptian_Warfare/.

unprotected manner. If they were soldiers, how could they protect her if they were busy carrying her?

The reasoning behind the inaccuracies here is likely due to the historical memory of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra I. When one thinks of Julius Caesar, one pictures a regal, middle-aged man with a laurel crown and an exquisite toga that presents himself in a dignified manner having been the “head” of Rome. Besides the clothing, this is exactly how he appears here; however, it is not a stretch for people to believe that Caesar could have worn extravagant short sleeve tunics. After all, he was the pseudo-ruler of Rome—as long as he looks the part, people will see him as a dignified figure. Cleopatra, on the other hand, is a strange case. It is not weird for the audience to have seen Cleopatra as an exotic figure from the exotic land of ancient Egypt, hence her dress. Her headdress is questionable though in that the average person would likely have seen images of Queen Nefertiti or Cleopatra in other mediums with more traditional headdresses and clothing, so why is she depicted as she is here? It is likely not just due to her being “exotic”, but also to present her as a sex symbol—especially for Caesar. Doing this helps feed into her being the beauty that she is often depicted as and better conveys why she would lead Caesar to want to return to the past.

The Roman salute is also a victim of historical memory having been popularized appearing in such a way through plays, other instances in filmed media, and historical references in other societies such as the original salute of the United States army and the Nazi salute. As I have already addressed, the Romans did not salute in this manner, rather it is a misconception that has lasted for centuries. The gold Roman sesterce, however, is likely not a victim of historical memory. When one thinks of Roman coins, they likely think of gold or silver, therefore, it is not unlikely that the show writers could have gotten away with using silver sesterces. The reasoning behind this error

is likely for story reasons. It is much more probable that one would be surprised by a gold coin than a silver one when coins that still contained 40% silver were used daily at the time²²⁸.

While not containing much history in this episode, *Bewitched* gets things right for the most part. Besides taking great liberties with the characters' dress, it generally gets their character right. Inaccuracies are largely due to the audience of young children to people of middle-age, i.e., families that are likely not historians or have a great deal of knowledge in history so historical accuracy of imagery is not the show's biggest concern and possibly not even a concern at all. The show does deserve praise in its accurate representation of Caesar's mannerisms, power, death, and relationship with Cleopatra all being mentioned which help portray and explain the character to the younger viewers who might not know much about him. This is especially the case when Caesar himself is learning about his own life. For example, in his reading, he makes a point when reading about Cleopatra—and it likely saying they slept together and had a child—him saying “is nothing sacred?” This signals to the viewer that this was something Caesar wished to keep private, alluding to the political situation created by the incident upon Caesar's return to Rome²²⁹. However, something else can be said entirely of the *HISTORY OF THE WORLD* duology.

HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I is a sketch comedy film by Mel Brooks that was released in 1981. In this film, from the ancient world we are presented with “The Old Testament” and “The Roman Empire”. In the Old Testament segment, we see Moses go to the mountain where God speaks to him. With thunder and lightning, he is given three stone tablets containing God's fifteen Commandments—one of which Moses drops—leaving him with the Ten

²²⁸ Stephanie Meredith, “100 Years of Silver Dollar Coinage, 1878-1978: U.S. Mint.” United States Mint, October 2, 2023. <https://www.usmint.gov/news/inside-the-mint/one-hundred-years-of-silver-dollar-coinage-1878-1978>.

²²⁹ Roller, 70.

Commandments.²³⁰ In the Bible, these events are slightly different. When Moses goes up the mountain alone, he is not given the Ten Commandments in the form of a tablet, nor do they appear in thunder and lightning. In fact, the thunder and lightning are what God speaks through from a cloud of smoke and Moses is sent back down the mountain to convey the Commandments to the people verbally.²³¹ The errors here can easily be explained as the physical tablets being necessary for the reduction of fifteen to ten Commandments due to clumsiness on the part of Moses. One can still very easily take historical value from this in that Moses went up the mountain, God spoke to him, and he received the “Ten Commandments for all to obey”.

In the ancient Rome section of the film, we follow the fictional story of Comicus, a stand-up philosopher. Comicus, alongside his agent Swiftus, the Vestal Virgin Miriam, and an Ethiopian slave named Josephus, gets in trouble with emperor Nero and is pursued by Marcus Vindictus and his legions out of Rome until they escape to Judea where Comicus interrupts the Last Supper.²³² While the fictional characters cannot be analyzed for their accuracy to perceived history, their place in the setting and the characters that are from antiquity can. Emperor Nero is the most prominent historical figure in this section of the film, so I will start with him.

Nero is presented as, to quote Comicus, “a big fat pig” in a white toga with a purple one decorated with gold accents over it and a metal laurel crown. He acts very flirtatious with his male attendant, has bad manners, is greedy—even having a treasure bath—performs poetry to his court, and believes himself to be “at the top of Olympus”.²³³ It is highly likely that this interpretation of Nero is based more on his portrayal by Peter Ustinov in *Quo Vadis*. Ustinov’s Nero is, again, a fan

²³⁰ Mel Brooks, John Morris, Ralph Burns, and Jack Hayes, *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I*. USA, 1981.

²³¹ Exodus 19-20 (New International Version).

²³² Brooks, *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I*. 1981.

²³³ Brooks, *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I*. 1981.

of the arts and a pompous sounding buffoon that cares for nothing but himself and inflating his own ego, believing that he can “see Olympus” and is “one with the gods immortal”.²³⁴ The Nero in *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I* uses the same infliction of a pompous jerk in his voice and is similarly egotistical and rude. Both also physically present themselves in an undignified and nonchalant manner—not as the emperor of the world would present themselves.

The real Nero is not too far off from the interpretation in *HISTORY OF THE WORLD* but there are key factors unsupported by history. In terms of his dress, it is not unlikely that Nero would have worn a purple toga like Julius Caesar and is recorded in Suetonius as having worn a purple robe and laurel crown.²³⁵ Nero not being the most delightful person and having a love of treasure is not out of character either. He is recorded in Suetonius as being “a man disgraced by every kind of wickedness”²³⁶ and having a “mad extravagance”²³⁷. However, he is not recorded being a rude glutton and openly sexual with his court.

His tendency to be sexually strange is not too much of a stretch, though. Nero *did* enter sexual acts with both men and women and did strange things like being released from a cage wearing an animal hide and attacking the privates of men and women bound to stakes.²³⁸ Nero has been proven in history to be a real-life internet troll that would purposely screw with people and act strange as he does in the film. On less strange notes, his quickness to put Comicus and Josephus to death and love of the arts are also accurate to the historical record. He is known to have had a “career of parricide and murder”²³⁹ and was fond of and wrote his own poetry²⁴⁰ that could likely

²³⁴ Mervyn LeRoy and Anthony Mann, *Quo Vadis*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA, 1951.

²³⁵ Suetonius, *Life of Nero*. 25 [Trans. Thayer].

²³⁶ Suetonius, *Nero*. 36

²³⁷ Suetonius, *Nero*. 31;4

²³⁸ Suetonius, *Nero*. 28-29.

²³⁹ Suetonius, *Nero*. 33.

²⁴⁰ Suetonius, *Nero*. 52.

have been read aloud to his court. He did not, however, have a wife named Nympho, rather he married three other women: Claudia Octavia, Poppaea Sabina, and Statilia Messalina.²⁴¹ Empress Nympho is a fictitious character that was likely created for comedic purposes but also in response to American society's changes in sexual ideas between the late 60's and 80's. From this analysis, we can see that, while heavily affected by the historical memory of *Quo Vadis* thirty years prior, Nero's portrayal in *HISTORY OF THE WORLD* is not too far off from how the real man is recorded as being—even in comedy. Perhaps this is due to Nero having been almost cartoonishly evil in his own life or the filmmakers did their research to make a largely accurate comedy out of history.

Many things can also be learned about Roman society in *HISTORY OF THE WORLD PART I*. In the opening scene of “The Roman Empire” we see street vendors selling columns, giving haircuts, selling used chariots, being soothsayer con-artists, and selling plumbing. I will go through each of these one-by-one. The column salesman, while adequately showing what many people think of when they think of Roman architecture: columns, would not have actually been there. Columns would have been built with buildings, not sold on the street to be placed on pre-existing ones. Haircuts also would not be given in the streets. Ancient Rome, and even ancient Greece, are recorded having barbers and barber shops. It was also quite a well-paid job in Rome—more evidence against it being the job of a street vendor.²⁴² Chariots especially would not be sold on the street. Chariot races were held by companies/factions that owned all chariots, horses, stables, equipment, and drivers—the drivers often being slaves.²⁴³ Therefore, it is unlikely that

²⁴¹ Suetonius, *Nero*. 35.

²⁴² Frank W. Nicolson, “Greek and Roman Barbers.” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 2 (1891): 41-56.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/310326>.

²⁴³ Jo-Ann Shelton and Pauline Ripat, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023. p. 446-447.

used chariots would be sold on the street and this is simply a joke about used car salesmen where carts or wagons would have been more fitting.

The soothsayer seen in *HISTORY OF THE WORLD* is unlike the actual haruspices of the Roman Empire. The haruspices would not use a magical headpiece and give fortunes to random people on the street. In real life, they would inspect the organs of a sacrifice given for a specific purpose.²⁴⁴ The soothsayer seen here is once again an inaccurate joke about the belief of modern fortune tellers and spiritual mediums being con artists. Last but not least: plumbing. While it is an obvious riff on television ads, the Romans *were* the first to use plumbing on a large scale and in public toilets to move water. However, they were not something to “pipe the shit right out of your house.”²⁴⁵ Roman plumbing would have been used to transfer water to homes but not for sewage. The middle and lower classes would typically use public toilets that had sewage connections while the upper class had personal toilets in their homes. These toilets were not connected to the sewer though out of fear of varmints getting in through the pipes.²⁴⁶

In the next scene, we see Comicus going to the unemployment office to collect his welfare payment. While the Roman empire did not have an unemployment office, there was occasional and sporadic welfare assistance from both the Senate and private parties.²⁴⁷ The nature of said help is presented perfectly later in the film when the Senate meets and rejoices in yelling “fuck the poor”²⁴⁸—a belief that still persists today, hence the joke. There are also two other parts of this film I would like to address due to their incorrect placement that cannot be explained outside of

²⁴⁴ Robert Whiston, “Caput Extorum.” In William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*. John Murray, London, 1875. 240. [Trans. Thayer].

²⁴⁵ Brooks, *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I*. 1981.

²⁴⁶ Lina Zaldovich, “How the Ancient Romans Went to the Bathroom.” Smithsonian.com, November 15, 2021. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-the-ancient-romans-went-to-the-bathroom-180979056/>.

²⁴⁷ Shelton. 47.

²⁴⁸ Brooks, *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I*. 1981.

being for a joke. These are a scene where Moses parts a river for the group and when Comicus serves Jesus' group at the last supper. Moses appearing here is over 1,500 years late²⁴⁹ and Jesus' appearance is somewhere between 21-35 years too late²⁵⁰. Another quick thing to note is that the Roman salute here is also remarkably similar to a Nazi salute, still a bit off from the Roman salute, but distinguishes itself with the thumb folded in—likely to separate it from the Nazi salute, possibly because Mel Brooks is Jewish.

While not completely accurate, this film does provide a vision into the ancient world and some historical aspects about it by appealing to historical memory. These features represent how many remember the Roman empire with plumbing, columns, and chariot racing being the big three. They also represent how appealing to recent memory, with how it calls back to *Quo Vadis*' Nero, is important as well. With the target audience of young adults and older, they would likely get the historical references and know enough to be able to tell when things are inaccurate or out of place—like the soothsayer, Moses, and a scene where the group enters Caesars Palace to enter Caesar's palace. Because of this, *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part I* is able to create a mostly historically accurate setting for comedic elements to be placed in. Its characters and world provide a window into what the past would have looked like, and, beneath comedic elements, provides the viewer with a nuanced view of the ancient world's corruption and other workings. *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II* does not fare so well in this regard.

HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II's ancient history aspects—now through a streamed series format—relate solely to the life of Jesus. In doing this, it only represents the barebones story of Jesus' life with him and Mary falling in love and Judas betraying Jesus and the apostles leading

²⁴⁹ James Ussher, *The Annals of the World* (London: Printed by E. Tyler, for J. Cook and G. Bedell, 1658): 34, paragraph 164. From <https://archive.org/details/AnnalsOfTheWorld/page/n34/mode/1up>.

²⁵⁰ This is based on Jesus having died in 33AD and Nero having ruled from 54-68AD.

to Jesus' arrest. In the first part, "The Story of Jesus", Judas gets paid off by Roman guards to give away Jesus to them by kissing him on the cheek. Then, at a club/bar run by Saint Peter, Judas accidentally gives the signal to arrest Jesus after he kisses him on the cheek in thanks for Jesus sparing him from cleaning his feet after Judas urinated on them. The second part, "Jesus and Mary Fall in Love", follows Jesus and Mary falling in love at an early twentieth century style carnival before he has to run away to escape the Romans. The third and final part, "Jesus and the Apostles' Last Band Session" follows Jesus and his apostles' band preparing for a gig after Judas left and playing for the people before the Roman guard arrests him, once again tipped off by Judas.²⁵¹

There is also another short sketch about the building of the pyramids that I will fully address here because there is not much substance. In this short, two people encounter a man on the street trying to rope them into a pyramid scheme to build the pyramids where the product being pushed is the bricks. It is almost immediately exposed as a scam by a previous customer and the man beams away. This at least shows that normal people built the pyramids rather than slaves²⁵². There is no historical context here besides free people building the pyramids, so I will now move back into analyzing the skits centered around Jesus.

In comparison to the original film, in *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II*, historical figures are put into modern scenarios rather than placing modern concepts in the past. Where this series puts Jesus in a 1900's-style carnival, the original film might have themed the carnival more around the time period and focused more on that aspect. This does, however, say a lot about how the creators see their audience. While the creators once again are aiming for a mature audience,

²⁵¹ Mel Brooks, Wanda Sykes, Nick Kroll, Ike Barinholtz, and David Stassen, *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II*. USA, 2023.

²⁵² Jonathan Shaw, "Who Built the Pyramids?" *Harvard Magazine*, June 6, 2019. <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2003/07/who-built-the-pyramids-html>.

they also have to worry about fans of the original from over forty years prior. Younger fans from the time would now be much more knowledgeable and likely still be able to pick out the history from the comedic elements. Today's younger audience also would be able to get the story easily through the skeletal story concepts which possibly say the creators see them either as having a lack of historical knowledge or having enough to not need much historical accuracy in the film. The simplicity of the story is possibly also due to it being watered down with the drop in Christians in the United States²⁵³ leading to many who may only know the basic skeletal story of Jesus.

The way it is structured also says how it was made more for historical references to modern pop culture (romance movies, Saturday Night Live, classic band stories, live streaming in the case of another skit) rather than a historical comedy. There needs to be that relatability for the younger audience through scenes like Jesus and Mary falling in love and going to a carnival or Judas and Luke talking about foot-jobs and coming home from a dinner party hungry. I would also like to address a major historical change made for *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II* in terms of pop culture and relatability. In all three skits, Jesus, Mother Mary, Mary, her family, and the apostles spare for Judas and Saint Peter are all portrayed by African Americans. While there is an argument that Jesus could have had slightly darker skin—being from the Middle East²⁵⁴—he was not of African descent as far as historians are concerned. As far as we know, none of the other figures I mentioned are known to be of African descent either. So why would Mel Brooks and the writers of *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II* choose to portray them this way?

²⁵³ Reem Nadeem, "1. How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, September 13, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>.

²⁵⁴ "Nazareth." Wikipedia, October 11, 2023. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazareth>.

The reasoning is likely due to changes in the social tide of the United States. In the past decade especially, Americans have become more in-tune with how people of color have been portrayed in history and media. This has led to alternative versions of historical representations where the casts are all people of color like the founding fathers in the play *Hamilton*²⁵⁵ or in Netflix's *Queen Cleopatra* (2023) which depicts her as an African²⁵⁶—despite it being known she did not have an Egyptian complexion as previously stated. Looking at it with this context, it becomes evident that the casting choices for *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II* were made more for the purposes of a social commentary on inclusivity rather than for sake of an argument that a certain figure was of a darker complexion than typical portrayals. This is true for *Hamilton* and likely *Queen Cleopatra* as well. While it is good to promote inclusivity, one must also take special care to ensure that the audience knows when this is being done. For a figure like Jesus in a comedy or the founding fathers in a play, this is not as much of an issue as say Cleopatra—whose debate has already been more or less settled—in a more serious portrayal that can easily cause issues of how she appears in historical memory. I will delve further into the topic of societal changes affecting films and why it is important in chapter 8.

²⁵⁵ “Cast & Creative – New York – Hamilton Official Site.” Hamilton Musical. Accessed October 15, 2023. <https://hamiltonmusical.com/new-york/cast/>.

²⁵⁶ Jada Pinkett Smith, *Queen Cleopatra*. Netflix, 2023.

CHAPTER 6: CLEOPATRA – QUEEN OF THE SILVER SCREEN

Caesar and Cleopatra (1945), *Bewitched* (1969), *Cleopatra* (1963), *Queen Cleopatra* (2023)

Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt is a figure deserving of her own chapter because of the magnitude of both her life and legacy and the complexity of how she is portrayed in filmed media. Like with many of the films I have analyzed throughout this paper, she does appear accurate to the historical record for some, or even many aspects; but for each consistency there is an inconsistency. However, unlike previous examples, Cleopatra is presented in a way that presents issues of the film medium and American society at the time of each film's release much more potently than other aspects. These mostly appear in changes to her character, but also in changes to her life and her interactions with other characters like Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius. By doing this, the filmmakers help a propagandized history centered around men to persist solely to fill the expectations of the society they are working in.

One way that Cleopatra is affected by the film medium is with the condensing of her immediate family and its conflicts. To start, Cleopatra had three other siblings besides Ptolemy XIII, whom she combats and usurps rule from with the help of Julius Caesar in *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Cleopatra*. Her elder sister Berenike IV is understandably not mentioned in either film since she was executed by their father Ptolemy XII in 55 BCE for usurping the kingdom after he fled in 58 BCE.²⁵⁷ The other two unmentioned siblings, however, were still alive at the time of the Alexandrian War and Caesar actually helped banish her sister Arsinoe to secure her position on the throne²⁵⁸ with her brother, Ptolemy XIV, presumed dead after the two siblings led a revolt against her. He would eventually pop back up in the Phoenician city of Arados and he and Arsinoe

²⁵⁷ Roller, 159.

²⁵⁸ Roller, 62.

would be killed by Antonius to eliminate any rivals to Cleopatra.²⁵⁹ In both historical films, Cleopatra is not directly linked to Ptolemy XIII's death, rather it is done by Caesar for her.²⁶⁰ By removing Cleopatra's other siblings, it hides the family murdering tendencies of the Ptolemies that occurred throughout the dynasty.²⁶¹

Perhaps this is to make her not seem power hungry or like other rulers who might do the same when this is not necessarily the case. Cleopatra was very set on restoring the former glory of the Ptolemaic Empire²⁶² through the reacquiring of lands previously owned by it much in the same way that Rome sought expansion and glorification—using both Caesar and Antonius to do so. Another likely reason for the shrinking of the family is to in turn shrink the conflicts to be between only Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIII and Cleopatra, Antonius, and Octavian. This simplifies the plots to just the most important players and events, making the stories much easier for the audience to understand. This also plays into another aspect of these films in that they center around Cleopatra's romances more than the other important aspects of her life. Julius Caesar, Marcus Antonius, and their relationships with Cleopatra are at the center of both films. Antonius' relationship almost becomes second to Cleopatra's conflict with Octavian in *Cleopatra* but her relationship with the men in her life still takes center stage more than anything else.

Another family-related aspect of Cleopatra that is absent from these films is her children. In her life, Cleopatra had four children: Ptolemy XV Caesar (Caesarion), twins Cleopatra Selene II and Alexander Helios, and Ptolemy Philadelphus—the latter three fathered by Antonius²⁶³. The

²⁵⁹ Roller, 79.

²⁶⁰ Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945. & Joseph L. Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*. June 12, 1963; Walter Wanger, 20th Century-Fox, 1963.

²⁶¹ Roller, 29-42.

²⁶² Roller, 82, 92.

²⁶³ Roller, 5.

latter three are absent from *Cleopatra* and only Caesarion makes an appearance. Yet, while Caesarion appears in and is a big part of *Cleopatra*'s story, he does not appear in *Caesar and Cleopatra* at all in the form of her being pregnant or birthed before Caesar's departure. The likeliest reasoning for this is because having children would take away from Cleopatra's depiction as a sex symbol. Men are more likely to show attraction to a single childless woman rather than one with several and one that causes trouble for his father²⁶⁴. Her use as a sex symbol is only furthered by the way she is depicted acting and dressing.

The most blatant evidence of her dress being used in this way appears in *Cleopatra* and *Bewitched*. In *Cleopatra*, there are several scenes where she is either taking a bath or scantily clad when addressing Caesar and Antonius to give herself the upper hand of sexual distraction.²⁶⁵ In *Bewitched*, Cleopatra is depicted, as I addressed previously, in clothes that appear to be almost like gold lingerie. This scene also has Cleopatra being blatantly used to seduce Caesar and get him to return to the past²⁶⁶ meaning that, though for the plot, Cleopatra is one hundred percent serving solely as a sex symbol here. In the two films, Cleopatra is presented flirtatiously hitting on Julius Caesar and using her sexuality and seductive skills to manipulate the men in her life. While this is not entirely inaccurate to the historical record, it plays into how historical memory has changed Cleopatra and the important aspects of her life.

Between these two films one can see how Cleopatra's life was made into a love story with her as the central love interest, sex symbol, and bachelorette. This is not necessarily against the historical record, though. It is recorded by Dio that Cleopatra immediately tried to seduce Caesar with beautiful dress, charm, and language skills and, alternatively, by Plutarch that she was

²⁶⁴ The birth of Caesarion led to many political and social issues for Julius Caesar back in Rome. Roller, 70.

²⁶⁵ Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*. 1963.

²⁶⁶ Jurist, *Bewitched*. "Samantha's Caesar Salad."

delivered to him in a rug as she is in the films.²⁶⁷ She is even recorded succeeding in seducing and using rhetoric against Octavian during their meeting in Alexandria to the point where he wound up unable to look her in the eyes.²⁶⁸ However, archaeologist and classical professor Duane Roller in *Cleopatra: A Biography*, points out that Cleopatra's role as a seductress is almost formulaic in all the sources that describe her relationships with Caesar and Antonius.²⁶⁹ It is almost as if these stories are affected by an overarching narrative manipulated to paint Cleopatra in this way. In fact, they very likely were. When relations between Antonius, Cleopatra, and Octavian soured, the latter entered a heavy propaganda campaign against the former two. According to Roller:

“She was categorized... as a dangerous sorceress, seen as a drunken fornicator and a disgrace to the Ptolemaic dynasty whose only goal was to conquer Rome... She was said regularly to use monsters, magic, and witchcraft to achieve her ends, and was an infamous poisoner who almost tricked Antonius into drinking one of her concoctions.”²⁷⁰

With such great exaggerations like this, it is not a stretch to conclude that descriptions like this affected and made their way into historical records of Caesar and Antonius by figures like Plutarch and Suetonius. Because of this, one must question exactly how Cleopatra is portrayed both historically and on screen and whether or not some aspects appear to be fabricated or exaggerated. Another way this propagandic role is fed by films is how Cleopatra's connections with Caesar and Antonius are heavily exaggerated or even understated.

Cleopatra's relationships with the two Romans are described differently in history compared to *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Cleopatra*. While the first film has what is likely a more

²⁶⁷ Roller, 61.

²⁶⁸ Roller, 146-147.

²⁶⁹ Roller, 98.

²⁷⁰ Roller, 130.

accurate relationship with Caesar that is a bit more political, it still paints the relationship as a love story minus Caesarion. It also adds a unique inaccuracy where Cleopatra is happy when Caesar, rather than Octavian, makes Egypt into a Roman province at the end of the film.²⁷¹ Most changes are made in *Cleopatra*. We still see the likely inaccuracy of Cleopatra being brought in wrapped in a rug, but it is followed by events that, while historically accurate on the surface, are altered to fit a narrative centered around the two leaders' relationship and romance that is not historically backed.

In *Cleopatra*, Caesar quickly falls for the queen, and they end up having a child named Caesarion after his father. Caesar, still in Alexandria, is ecstatic that he has a son who can be his heir and, after some time, returns to Rome. Years later, Cleopatra embarks on a trip to Rome, Caesarion in tow, and it is during that trip that Caesar plays with his son and teaches him how to rule before the Senate inevitably kills him. Following the reading of Caesar's will, Cleopatra flees Rome to return to Alexandria, remaining struck with grief for many years and even adorning a necklace made of Caesar's coins.²⁷² There are quite a few errors here. Caesar fled Rome before Caesarion was born to avoid the backlash that he would still end up receiving and having to deflect in Rome regarding his adultery with a foreign queen.²⁷³ This is supported by Plutarch's *The Life of Julius Caesar* when he states that "a little later [after Caesar left] she had a son by him whom the Alexandrians called Caesarion"²⁷⁴. According to Suetonius, it also was not until a visit to Rome in 46 BCE²⁷⁵ that Caesar saw Caesarion who was like him in "looks and carriage"; and Antonius declared to the Senate that Caesar had acknowledged the boy.²⁷⁶ Cleopatra is not recorded being

²⁷¹ Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945.

²⁷² Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*. 1963.

²⁷³ Roller, 67.

²⁷⁴ Plutarch, *Caesar*. 49. [Trans. Thayer].

²⁷⁵ Roller, 71.

²⁷⁶ Suetonius, *Caesar*. 52. [Trans. Thayer].

hung up on Caesar at all either. Surely, she would have mourned him, but nothing like creating and wearing the coin necklace shown in the film. She did honor his memory with the *Kaisarion* and *Forum Julium* but these were in part to better position herself and her kingdom in the growing Roman World.²⁷⁷ It is also unlikely that Caesar married Cleopatra²⁷⁸ as he did in the film because he was already married and for reasons I will explain through Antonius.

While it is possible that Cleopatra had a romantic relationship with Caesar, the only records between the two that exist are those regarding Cleopatra's usage of him in her political life. Cleopatra made great use of alliances with the most powerful and prominent Romans of her era like her predecessors²⁷⁹—these being Caesar and Antonius. Caesar not only assured her position on the throne against her siblings, but also helped to produce an heir for her kingdom, not just his Rome.²⁸⁰ Antonius was made to be of much more use to her politically than Caesar ever was, however.

Antonius and Cleopatra did share affection for each other, that is known. However, the political needs of their people and homelands always came first.²⁸¹ In this way, Cleopatra made significant use of Antonius' powers as eastern triumvir to achieve her goals of restoring the Ptolemaic Empire. Through him, Egypt reclaimed so much of its previously controlled lands that it almost reached its territorial limits and would have rivaled Rome.²⁸² Even their children were a way of using Antonius because it created a personal alliance between the two and ensured support for the kingdom that housed his children and their mother.²⁸³ In *Cleopatra*, neither of these

²⁷⁷ Roller, 110.

²⁷⁸ Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*. 1963.

²⁷⁹ Roller, 80.

²⁸⁰ Roller, 82.

²⁸¹ Roller, 77.

²⁸² Roller, 82, 92.

²⁸³ Roller, 85.

important facts about their relationship are mentioned. The film instead chooses to focus on the relationship between Antonius and Cleopatra's time apart and how the politics of his Roman life affect her feelings for him. In the film and the historical record, this culminates with her convincing him to marry her in what the film presents as a typical Egyptian wedding, like Caesar had.

These weddings would have been highly problematic for either Roman back home. Antonius' wedding is only cited in passing by Plutarch and is shown on coinage, but that does not necessarily mean that this was true. Such a marriage to a foreign queen would have been a disaster for Antonius's personal image and political status at home—especially during the propaganda war that Octavian was waging against the couple and Antonius being married to Octavian's sister Octavia at the time.²⁸⁴ It is just as likely that the wedding could even be a fabrication on the count of Octavian to defame Antonius further. It then would have soon become fact like the way Cleopatra is portrayed and perceived in the media of the past century.

In this way, one could start to see how Antonius's love in general might have been greatly exaggerated versus what likely occurred. He was never as completely aligned with Cleopatra as he appears for most of the film—occasionally favoring her rivals such as Herod²⁸⁵—and many of his actions done out of love for her, and hers out of love for him, were never the case. One of the biggest events centered around this in the film is at the Battle of Actium when Cleopatra, believing Antonius doomed and the battle lost, sets sail for Egypt, leaving him to die. Seeing this, Antonius chases her ship out of love and becomes depressed from her almost leaving him behind and the situation he has ended up in.²⁸⁶ Roller points out that what likely happened was that Cleopatra—commanding ships in the fleet rather than leaving it to Antonius as she does in the film—realized

²⁸⁴ Roller, 100, 130.

²⁸⁵ Roller, 136.

²⁸⁶ Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*. 1963.

that they were in no position to stop Octavian and defend Egypt so, with favorable winds, sailed through the battle to escape. Then, seeing this, Antonius gave chase to learn what she was doing and assess the situation when he found himself escaping south with her.²⁸⁷

It is also important to note that Cleopatra took advantage of and exploited Antonius heavily with the film accentuating her love for him, especially at the end of their lives. From the beginning, Cleopatra used Antonius' affection for her to not only build her empire²⁸⁸, but, as previously stated, also to create heirs that would rope him into her grasp tighter²⁸⁹. When Octavian was heading to Alexandria from Greece, Cleopatra and Antonius were each trying to negotiate with him. Through these, it has become known that Cleopatra herself was prepared for Octavian to give her a well-funded exile so long as Caesarion remained king. However, Antonius is never mentioned here, and she presumably would have left him to die—she even entertained killing him herself several times as well.²⁹⁰ Even following this, she took advantage of his known suicidal tendencies for her own gain. She manipulated events to make him think she was killed, causing him to stab himself in the stomach and thereby taking one liability and major player off the battlefield.²⁹¹

It is important to note, however, that this does not mean Cleopatra did not feel the same way or as much towards Antonius. There is a clear connection at the end since, in her letter to Octavian before her suicide, she wrote that she wished to be buried with Antonius and had him brought to her tomb after his attempted suicide as well.²⁹² Either way though, one cannot exactly say what is true or false with how Antonius and Cleopatra felt about each other. Historians today

²⁸⁷ Roller, 140.

²⁸⁸ Roller, 82, 92.

²⁸⁹ Roller, 85.

²⁹⁰ Roller, 144.

²⁹¹ Roller, 145-146.

²⁹² Roller, 145-146.

cannot look into the minds of them—they have been dead for millennia—and we cannot know that the sources for their lives are fully true. This is especially the case with these two because of the propaganda war with Octavian. Any Roman sources from this time onward must be questioned as to whether Octavian’s bias could have reached and affected the historical record. As Roller points out in his biography of Cleopatra, it is highly likely that Octavian affected her portrayal as a seductress.²⁹³ If this is the case, who knows what else was fabricated or exaggerated? Because of this, one cannot place as much blame—there is still plenty to place—on these films for making a big deal about Cleopatra’s love life, rather more on the sources they are based off of that do it themselves.

Other elements that are not exaggerated but de-emphasized in *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Cleopatra* are her scholarship and abilities. The only skills that are really shown in either film are her rhetoric, seductiveness, and ability to control others in the role of a damsel in distress or simple love interest. Cleopatra actually found great pleasure in learning.²⁹⁴ She was not only a medical writer, but also a skilled orator in at least ten different languages²⁹⁵. In fact, Cleopatra had gotten Alexandria’s intellectual culture to be the most distinguished it had ever been since Ptolemy III almost 200 years prior.²⁹⁶ She was also a brave military leader shown by the fact that she personally commanded sixty ships at the battle of Actium²⁹⁷—an aspect completely left out of *Cleopatra* where she leaves the fighting to Antonius and simply watches from the sidelines before fleeing.²⁹⁸

²⁹³ Roller, 130-136.

²⁹⁴ Roller, 49, 51.

²⁹⁵ Roller, 45-46.

²⁹⁶ Roller, 123.

²⁹⁷ Roller, 139.

²⁹⁸ Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*. 1963.

When she fled, in the historical record it was from the midst of the fighting because a chance arose with favorable winds²⁹⁹, not from relative safety.

Another aspect overlooked in *Cleopatra* is her vying for the survival of her kingdom with Octavian. For months, she tried to reason with him, even making herself dispensable just to ensure that her kingdom would survive. She also tried to groom Caesarion to be sole ruler, offered to leave under voluntary permanent banishment, and even dissociated from Antonius—Octavian’s main enemy. Her kingdom’s survival was her top priority no matter what³⁰⁰, yet, in the film, the struggle is presented as Cleopatra seemingly giving up in a vain fight before Octavian even arrives and dying the same day as Antonius.³⁰¹ In reality, she lived for several days after the fact until she realized Octavian’s true plans for her and her children.³⁰²

One must then ask, why was Cleopatra’s character changed so much for these films? Why were her abilities and family changed so drastically and even negatively, especially for a film titled *Cleopatra*? The reasoning is simple in that it is to serve the filmmakers’ agenda to fit expectations. For these films, the audience is looking for what has become the stereotypical Cleopatra in a seductive role serving as a love interest for great men in history. It is not meant to be a role showing her skills, abilities, knowledge, or nuances to rebut her place in history or serve as a role model for women. *Bewitched*, which is not bound by being strictly historical and focusing more on comedy, presents Cleopatra as outright seductive, posing that this is how she was seen in historical memory. It was never about her intelligence or larger family struggles, only how she affected the top dogs of the top empire: Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius of Rome. Without their influence, it would

²⁹⁹ Roller, 139.

³⁰⁰ Roller, 142-143.

³⁰¹ Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*. 1963.

³⁰² Roller, 145-147.

be a well based assumption that she would have been a relatively less well-known historical figure, being less influential in the history of great men and some women.

Another interesting aspect of historical memory regarding Cleopatra is the debate about her skin color. This debate is not something that would have mattered in the ancient world since Cleopatra's skin color was never what separated her or made her lesser to those in Rome—it was because she was a foreign queen. In no source is it stated that there was any issue because of a specific background, it was only because she was not Roman. Nevertheless, this debate has permeated Cleopatra's on-screen appearances and even led to a controversy in 2023 regarding the Netflix series *Queen Cleopatra*.

The series was created by African American actress and producer Jada Pinkett Smith and stars Adele James, a British-Jamaican actor. Because of James's darker complexion, the series has received a lot of backlash from viewers, historians, and even people from Egypt.³⁰³ While part of the controversy is due to racism with James receiving many hateful messages, it is also in part due to the mixed messages sent by the show's creators, already existing scholarship, and representations in filmed media. In an interview on Netflix's Tudum website, Smith explained her reasoning for the casting, stating that “We don't often get to see or hear stories about Black queens, and that was really important for [her], as well as for [her] daughter, and just for [her] community”³⁰⁴. Director Tina Gharavi and other producers provided further reasoning in other interviews. Gharavi talks about how it should be okay for Cleopatra to not be giving value through proximity to whiteness and that she wants Egyptians to see themselves at Africans—a sentiment

³⁰³ Sagal Mohammad, “Let's Just Call the Outrage Around Queen Cleopatra What It Is: Racism.” *Vogue*. May 17, 2023. <https://vogue.com/article/queen-cleopatra-netflix-racist-outrage>.

³⁰⁴ Tudum Staff, “Queen Cleopatra' Shows a Side of the Infamous Royal You Haven't Seen Before.” *Tudum by Netflix*, May 12, 2023. <https://netflix.com/tudum/articles/african-queens-release-date-cast-news>.

she has received “furious” backlash for and is okay with.³⁰⁵ Meanwhile, the producers for the show described how they chose to “depict her of mixed ethnicity to reflect theories about Cleopatra’s possible Egyptian ancestry and the multicultural nature of Ancient Egypt.”³⁰⁶ Then there is the first trailer for the series, where an interviewee says how her grandmother told her “I don’t care what they tell you in school. Cleopatra was black.”³⁰⁷ Any reasoning starts to become murky, however, because not only is Cleopatra made black, but also her entire immediate family and the population of Alexandria as well—issues with which I will mention soon.

Depicting Cleopatra with a mixed ethnicity is not necessarily incorrect. Roller describes how he believes Cleopatra was probably about three-quarters Macedonian and one-quarter Egyptian with a probably half-Egyptian priest mother.³⁰⁸ However, through their statements, Smith and Gharavi show that it was not necessarily a matter of historical accuracy for them. To them, it seems to be more of a political issue to once again use Cleopatra to push personal agendas of creating a black role model from Smith or push Pan-Africanism from Gharavi. From this, the issue has spread out from Cleopatra simply being black or white and into Egyptian and African politics. An Egyptian lawyer and even a former minister of antiquities in the country called the series a misrepresentation based in “falsehood” to “promote Afrocentric thinking” with an Egyptian broadcaster even recasting a lighter-skinned actor for its own version of *Queen Cleopatra*.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ Tina Gharavi, “‘Queen Cleopatra’ Director Speaks Out: ‘What Bothers You So Much About a Black Cleopatra?’ (EXCLUSIVE).” *Variety*, April 21, 2023. <https://variety.com/2023/tv/global/queen-cleopatra-black-netflix-egypt-1235590708/>.

³⁰⁶ Etan Vlessing, “Adele James Talks Netflix’s Controversial ‘Queen Cleopatra’ Series: ‘Blackwashing Isn’t a Thing’.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 11, 2023. <https://hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-queen-cleopatra-controversy-adele-james-1235485303/>.

³⁰⁷ Netflix, “Queen Cleopatra | Official Trailer | Netflix.” YouTube Video, 2:04, April 12, 2023. <https://youtu.be/IktHcPyNlv4?si=CyyyWm2jV50n1k0T>.

³⁰⁸ Roller, 15.

³⁰⁹ Mohammad, “Let’s Just Call...” *Vogue*.

While much of the discourse comes from racism and online trolls, there is a side of the academic sphere that believes Cleopatra was not Egyptian at all and was in fact white. In fact, there is a lot more evidence for this than her being Egyptian. In her depictions on coins³¹⁰ and in a statue of her³¹¹, she appears to have many more Greek facial features than Egyptian ones. Furthermore, there is quite a bit of evidence against her father, or any Ptolemy for that matter, having relations with an Egyptian woman of any class or stature. Throughout its life, the Ptolemy family was largely incestuous³¹² and likely would not have sought any Egyptian relations. Cleopatra was the first to even learn the Egyptian language after all.³¹³ Greeks were also known to be quite xenophobic³¹⁴ as well, especially the Ptolemies who kept Alexandria as a Greek city and worked hard to remain distinct and completely separate from the natives.³¹⁵ With all of this considered, it is much more likely that Cleopatra did not have any Egyptian blood in her. If this is true, then it would mean that *Queen Cleopatra* is cultural appropriation in making a Greek Macedonian woman Egyptian and outright saying she was Black along with her family and city. Both sides considered, one can see how such extreme discourse has formed both within and outside of the academic sphere regarding the series.

In comparison to Adele James' mixed-race Cleopatra, in the films I have mentioned, Cleopatra was played by light-complexioned women. In *Caesar and Cleopatra*, she was played

³¹⁰ Roller, 180-181.

³¹¹ Images from Bill Thayer, "Was Cleopatra Beautiful?." The Beauty of Cleopatra, *Penelope*, University of Chicago, accessed February 3, 2024. https://penelope.uchicago.edu/encyclopaedia_romana/miscellanea/cleopatra/bust.html.

³¹² In the "Genealogy of the Later Ptolemies" chart on Roller, 164., one can see many of the branches between siblings leading to children throughout the dynasty before Cleopatra.

³¹³ Roller, 34, 46.

³¹⁴ Gregory T. Papanikos, "Philoxenia and Xenophobia in Ancient Greece." Athens Institute for Education and Research. Athens, Greece, 7 March 2020. [https://atiner.gr/gtp/Papanikos\(2020\)-Philoxenia.pdf](https://atiner.gr/gtp/Papanikos(2020)-Philoxenia.pdf).

³¹⁵ Roller, 31, 34.

by Vivien Leigh who was possibly Anglo-Indian.³¹⁶ In *Cleopatra*, she was played by Elizabeth Taylor, a white English American actress.³¹⁷ In *Bewitched*, Elizabeth Thompson, another white actor, but of unknown background, takes up the role. If Cleopatra being part Egyptian is to be believed, then it is relatively more accurate for her to be played by someone with darker skin. Furthermore, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, if she were white, she would not appear nearly as pale as she does in the films I mentioned unless she did not go outside with the hot Egyptian Sun.

What should be taken from this is that whether Cleopatra is portrayed as black, white, or mixed should not matter. Her complexion did not matter in her time, and it is only an issue due to modern politics and race relations. The past cannot simply be viewed with modern day eyes and, while it is good to connect the past to ourselves in the present, we must view things as we know/believe them to have been. We cannot find a body for Cleopatra to check her complexion because the body would be 2,000 years old, and her tomb no longer exists as far as we know. Her character portrayal in each instance should be criticized much harder than the color of the actor's skin. What really matters is how Cleopatra was typecasted into roles of a damsel or seductress or made lesser intellectually to fit narratives woven around important men in films even solely titled and about her. Less focus should be put on why it always being a story of how Cleopatra seduced men and together affected the Roman world with emphasis shifting to how these men affected Cleopatra and the Egyptian world and vice versa. By continuing to tell stories like this, we are only continuing the history of "great men and few women".

³¹⁶ Douglass K. Daniel, "Review: Book Casts Welcome Light on Actress Vivien Leigh." *AP News*, March 11, 2019. <https://apnews.com/article.10af7966d8ff442c935d32cebd67e769>.

³¹⁷ "Elizabeth Taylor." Hollywood Walk of Fame, December 9, 2020. <https://walkoffame.com/elizabeth-taylor/>.

It is also important to note how, through this analysis, the existence of a generational Cleopatra is brought out into the open. Through this character, we see changes in the role of women both in the United States and history which I will address in more detail in the next chapter. In each interpretation in 1945, 1963, 1969, and 2023, we see a Cleopatra that embodies how women are viewed by society. She starts as a weak and childish young ruler that needs a strong and experienced man to guide her to a strong figure of power that has a strong relationship and sphere of influence in her country and the world that is on equal footing with the most powerful men in the Roman world.³¹⁸ This directly reflects the feminist movement that has taken place in American society and the historical sphere in the past century. Through providing a single figure that reflects these views, Cleopatra does not only affect historical memory but also embodies and transforms its past as well. With each change and iteration of the character, we start to see a trend of how films can change for the greater good alongside their creators and audiences.

³¹⁸ Smith, *Queen Cleopatra*. 2023.

CHAPTER 7: TRENDS OF ACCURACY

Through analysis in the previous five chapters, certain trends that change over time start to appear. These go both beyond and are encased within the chapter topics I mentioned, encapsulating the entirety of historical filmed media from 1908 to 2023. These trends range from the way the different sexes and religion's portrayals change, the way these movies are made, and the effects of the periods in which they are released.

When looking at sword and sandal films especially, one can see how the films of the early to mid-twentieth century seem to lean into the tropes and social norms much more than later films. This is especially the case with how women of history have been portrayed in the past century. As the years progress, one can see their roles go from damsels in distress to stronger ones as strong queens and even femme fatales. In earlier films, we see historical figures such as Cleopatra in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Andromeda in *Clash of the Titans* (1981), and Varinia in *Spartacus* shown to be weaker, sex symbols, and needing to be rescued by the strongmen of their films—Julius Caesar, Perseus, and Spartacus, respectively.

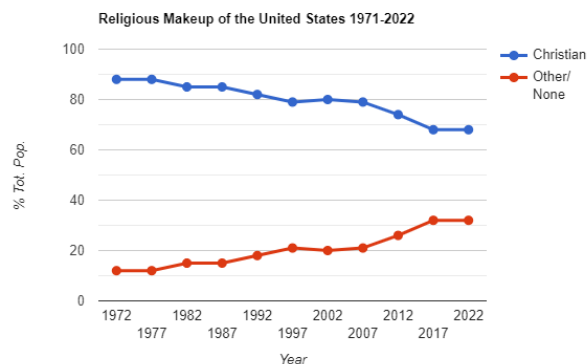
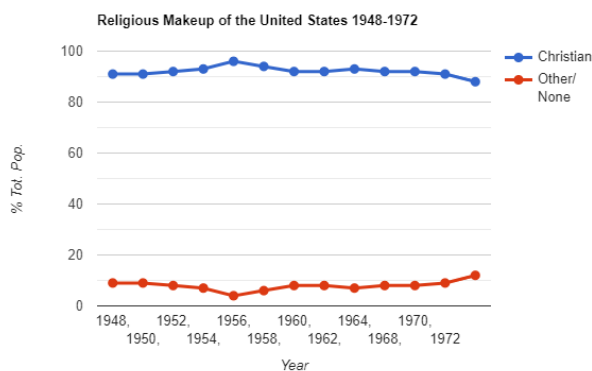
In the past two and a half decades, we have seen this trope flipped around, putting women in strong, even leading, roles. They are seen in Queen Gorgo in the *300* duology, Io in *Clash of the Titans* (2010), and Cleopatra in *Queen Cleopatra*. Cleopatra is a great example of this because the change in how she is portrayed is visible throughout the past century. She grows from a plotting, almost evil damsel in 1945³¹⁹ to having a leading role in a self-titled film in 1963 where she is still highly reliant on the powerful men in her life³²⁰ and ultimately ending on a series in 2023 where she is the main character that moves away from Augustan propaganda to portray her

³¹⁹ Pascal, *Caesar and Cleopatra*. 1945

³²⁰ Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*. 1963.

as a strong, prideful queen³²¹. The reasoning for such changes in the portrayal of females is due to changes in the social tide of the United States trying to put women into positions of power and on an equal playing field with men.

Another way that these films have changed in their accuracy is in how they portray religion and are bound by it. As I addressed in chapters 2 and 4, *Ben-Hur* changed a lot in how it portrayed the story of Jesus, and this is likely due to changes in the religious make-up of the United States. According to Pew Research Center, there has been a steady decline in the number of Christian Americans since 1972.³²² Before then, the percent of the United States that was Christian was relatively stable staying around 91-93%. This was down from a whole 99.5% in 1906.³²³



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³²¹ Smith, *Queen Cleopatra*. 2023.

³²² “The rise of religious ‘noners’ looks similar in data from Pew Research Center and the General Social Survey.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., September 8, 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/08/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/pf_2022-09-13_religious-projections_01-01/.

³²³ E. Dana Durand. “Religious Bodies: 1906.” Bureau of the Census. United States Department of Commerce and Labor, 1906. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/bulletins/demographic/103-religious-bodies.pdf>.

³²⁴ Data from: “Religion.” Gallup, September 14, 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.

Today, based on data from 2014, the number of Christians in each subsequent generation that is alive today decreased.³²⁵ However, this is likely due to the introduction of immigrants from all over the world and changing social tides in the country during the past century.

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ was released in a period in which a large majority of the United States was Christian—likely well above ninety percent. This explains why this 1925 film was so close to biblical accuracy with its on-screen text and not even portraying Jesus as more than a glowing figure.³²⁶ Not only does this follow Christian doctrine of not portraying divine beings³²⁷, but also avoids any backlash that would have occurred for any inconsistencies. In 1959 when that year's *Ben-Hur* was released, 92% of the United States was Christian.³²⁸ This decrease might have played at least a small part in the filmmakers of this version choosing to not as many hide details about Jesus. Rather, they portray him as he appears in traditional depictions—albeit still hiding his face.³²⁹ A big change occurs in 2016 however, with that year's depiction of *Ben-Hur*. At the time, the Christian population of the United States only made up about 70³³⁰-74% of the total population.³³¹ This drop in the number of Christians, along with a drop in religious devotion among younger people³³² who are more likely to go to the theater³³³ are the likely reasons for the grittier

³²⁵ “Generational Replacement Helping Drive Growth of Unaffiliated, Decline of Mainline Protestantism and Catholicism.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., May 7, 2015. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr_15-05-12_rls-01/.

³²⁶ Niblo, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. 1925.

³²⁷ Exodus 20 (New International Version).

³²⁸ “Religion.” Gallup.

³²⁹ Wyler, *Ben-Hur*. 1959.

³³⁰ “Religion.” Gallup.

³³¹ “The rise of religious ‘nones’...” Pew Research Center.

³³² “American devotion to religion is waning, according to new study.” UCL News, University College London, March 10, 2016. <https://ucl.ac.uk/news/2016/mar/american-devotion-religion-waning-according-new-study/>.

³³³ Megan Brenan, “Movie Theater Attendance Far Below Historical Norms.” Gallup, January 7, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/388538/movie-theater-attendance-far-below-historical-norms.aspx>. for 2016 specifically: “Theatrical Market Statistics 2016.” Motion Picture Association of America, March 2017. https://www.motionpictures.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2016_Final-1.pdf.

and more realistic Jesus³³⁴ compared to the film's predecessors. Through these films and the religious contexts of the periods they were released in, one can see how changes in the beliefs of a society change the ways their stories are told and what pieces of information are important or changeable. In this case, the appearance of Jesus and his characterization were able to change over time—especially in 2016—but his story stayed the same since that is a staple of the film's story and Christian doctrine.

Two other trends that have appeared are the way films' stories are structured and how the stories themselves affect how the films can change historical memory. In films like *Julius Caesar*, *Against the Pirates*, *Spartacus*, and *The Fall of Rome*, the opposing side of "enemies" is explored and humanized to the point that the audience may actually feel some remorse when they are defeated. Comparatively, in recent years, films have made their conflicts more one sided and have turned towards having more revenge plots.

A good example of this is with both *Clash of the Titans* films. In the 1981 rendition, you are made to almost feel bad for Calibos and the various goddesses that plot against Perseus after seeing their positions and struggles. They are given feelings and seem almost human.³³⁵ In comparison, the 2010 film makes the story openly one-sided against Hades and Calibos, making them out solely to be evil villains that the audience will want dead and/or defeated. This is compounded by the legend being turned into a revenge story of Perseus avenging his family who was killed by Hades.³³⁶ Another example of this is 2016's *Ben-Hur* where his goal is constantly revenge. In the original story and the first two films, Ben-Hur also has goals of finding his family, has a paternal relationship with Quintus Arrius, and only wishes for revenge against Messala who

³³⁴ Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. 2016.

³³⁵ Davis, *Clash of the Titans*. 1981.

³³⁶ Leterrier, *Clash of the Titans*. 2010.

he sees as a Roman traitor who sold out him and his family.³³⁷ In the 2016 film, Ben-Hur's sole goal is to get revenge on Messala and even takes revenge on Quintus Arrius during the naval battle, knocking him off the oar he is hanging onto for dear life.³³⁸ You are not made to feel any remorse for Arrius, but Messala is made to be somewhat cared about through exploration of his life and character.

A film where this change is very blatant is *300: Rise of an Empire*. In this film, the main villain Artemisia is given a long backstory exploring her rough childhood and upbringing and the thoughts and emotions behind her actions. Despite this, in the film's context she is still made out to be almost completely unlikable and an undisputable villain against the noble Greek heroes. Her being Greek is not addressed, either, further separating her from the "heroes".³³⁹ With this trend in mind, one would probably ask "why does this matter, why is it happening, and for *300: Rise of an Empire*'s case, why give such extensive backstory if it is still going to be so one-sided?" The reason that this is an issue is because it presents history too simply.

History is never one-sided with a hero and villain or good and bad, rather it is always up to interpretation and there is always a deeper conflict and larger historical context. There was never a main villain of the Perseus legends that essentially orchestrated his entire journey and Artemisia was not some kind of evil villain. She might have been a villain to Greece, but she was never as manipulative and plotting as she was made out to be in the film. An unrelated example of this effect is as follows. A film releases portraying Ptolemy XIII's position in the Alexandrian War and poses Julius Caesar as the villain. In this case, people might start to see Julius Caesar as a villainous dictator and conqueror rather than a great hero of Rome. They would also possibly see

³³⁷ Niblo, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. 1925. and Wyler, *Ben-Hur*. 1959.

³³⁸ Bekmambetov, *Ben-Hur*. 2016.

³³⁹ Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014.

Ptolemy XIII as a hero or martyr. This same scenario could apply to any of the characters in the films I have mentioned. Whether they are the hero or villain, the polarization of conflict will misrepresent the historical context of the events portrayed.

As for why this is happening and why so much care is given just to still be so black and white in showing conflict, it is likely due to the pop culture and societal contexts these films were released in. The 2000's is what brought the spectacle of comic books and big action movies to the forefront of American pop culture. The Sam Raimi Spider-Man trilogy, the Dark Knight trilogy, *Cloverfield*, the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Harry Potter, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe films are a few examples of what have defined the past two decades' film industry. With big budget, larger than life, highly popular, and visual effects-driven films dominating the scene, historical films had to catch up. Notice how a lot of these feature some kind of big bad: Marvel villains like Green Goblin and Loki, DC villains like the Joker, Gollum, and Voldemort just to name a few. In most of these cases, it is simply a hero versus villain story, and this is especially the case in the 2010's with Marvel films dominating the movie scene³⁴⁰. With this in mind and knowing films need to keep up with and compete with the others of their time, it is easy to see how historical films have ended up the way they have. It is almost expected that films with big conflicts like these films adapting history and set in historical contexts will have these polarized conflicts. This expectation is even likely furthered by the growing political polarity of the United States³⁴¹ population that seeps into all walks of life as well.

³⁴⁰ Of the top ten highest grossing films of all time, four of them are Marvel films released between 2012-2021. They occupy spots 2, 6, 7, and 10. BonaFideBOSS, "Top 1000 Highest-Grossing Movies of All Time." IMDb, accessed February 17, 2024. <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls098063263/>.

³⁴¹ "Political Polarization in the American Public." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., June 12, 2014. <https://pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

In changing stories to fit the time periods they release in; it has also seemingly led recent films to focus less on the overall story and more on the individual characters within them. I have already addressed how this can be seen especially in *Clash of the Titans* (2010). The basic bone structure of the story in the original film is there, but it is drastically changed along with Perseus' character and story arc. This change is also seen with *Ben-Hur* (2016), *300: Rise of an Empire*, and *HISTORY OF THE WORLD Part II*. Part of the reason for this may be expansion in history education or the precursors already existing and providing historical context. It would be similar to how there is a Cleopatra for each era. However, the main reason for this trend is likely, again, having to compete in what is already a heavily competitive box office.

The box office for films of the early twenty-first century was like the Roman Colosseum. People did not go to the Colosseum to see cheap or boring shows; they wanted to see spectacles of battles, exciting fights, and spilling of blood (you do not go to see prisoners fighting with swords in an arena expecting neither to die). Modern cinema is very similar. When you go into a film with a big title like "Clash of the Titans" or "Rise of an Empire", you expect a spectacle; and with changes in technology like CGI, one cannot get away with small static fights like in *The 300 Spartans* (1962)³⁴² or an unrealistic monster like the 1981 Kraken³⁴³. This leads to long, panning, agile, and in your face shots like the first scene of Leonidas fighting in *300*³⁴⁴ and giant skyscraper sized monsters like the 2010 Kraken³⁴⁵.

Through this lens, it becomes quite obvious that the main reason for changes in the accuracy of historical films as you get closer to the modern day is simply changes in society.

³⁴² Rudolph Maté, *The 300 Spartans*. August 29, 1962; 20th Century Fox, 1962.

³⁴³ Davis, *Clash of the Titans*. 1981.

³⁴⁴ Snyder, *300*. 2006.

³⁴⁵ Davis, *Clash of the Titans*. 2010.

Changes in social statuses, technology, entertainment, and societal makeup all contribute to how these films are made. This in turn feeds back into society in how accurate these films are and how they affect historical memory for better or worse. Moving women into more stronger positions of power corrects how they are viewed in historical memory. It moves them away from more modern stereotypes and into the correct context of their histories. Changes in the portrayal of religious events are better in terms of teaching the real history of them to society at large, but maybe not so much for the religious institutions that try to uphold their received doctrines. Changes in stories overall, especially legends, often have negative effects since they change the way people look at ancient societies and their morals, relationships with their gods, and ways of life. The biggest factor in the accuracy of historical films and their effects though is education.

CHAPTER 8: THE TRENDS OF HISTORY EDUCATION AND FILMS IN THE UNITED STATES

As I have addressed throughout this paper, the ultimate goal of a film is to make money. In this way, many filmmakers will try to follow popularity trends of different genres to capitalize on what the public wants most. Now, this is not to say that a majority of films will try to fit the most popular genre. Blockbuster films can be released in any genre and the box office is still very diverse. In 2024 some box office releases are as follows:

Godzilla -1/-c (Japanese kaiju horror), *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* (American monster), *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* (adventure), *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* (horror), *Dune: Part 2* (science fiction), *Civil War* (history), *The Garfield Movie* (comedy), *Glitter & Doom* (romance), *Gladiator 2* (fictional history).

Of this list, I made it a point to mention two history films, including a sequel to one I analyzed in this paper, to point out that they still have a place in theaters and not just in home releases or on video on demand platforms like Netflix and Hulu. However, since the early 2000's, historical films have been far from the forefront of the public's interest.

As I have mentioned, this period saw a rise in popularity of superhero movies and therefore profits with four of the highest grossing films of all time being Marvel films within the nine-year span from 2012-2021. The ten years from 2002-2012 saw *Spider-Man* (2002) earning \$686 million, *The Dark Knight* (2008) earning \$348 million, *Iron Man* (2008) earning \$445 million, and *Avengers* (2012) earning a whopping \$1.28 billion all in profits. By comparison, even the most popular historical films from 2000-2010 never made profits higher than \$400 million. *Gladiator* (2000) made \$400 million; *Alexander* (2004) made \$12 million; *300* (2006) made \$396 million

and *Clash of the Titans* (2010) made \$368 million³⁴⁶. In fact, these four are among the top ten highest grossing sword and sandals films of all time and five are ones mentioned in this paper. *Clash of the Titans* (2010) is number 1, *Gladiator* 3, *300* 4, *300: Rise of an Empire* 5, and *Alexander* 10.³⁴⁷ It is the competition and conjoining between these genres of action films that makes money, especially in recent years. The only top sword-and-sandals film before 2000 is *Hercules* (1997).³⁴⁸

Historical films and superhero films are also a good comparison because nowadays they usually have similar budgets and involve similar amounts of work. Both require extensive use of specialized costumes and larger than life sets that can now be made using CGI rather than big elaborate physical sets and backgrounds. The best example of this is *300*, in which most of the film was made using a blue screen to key in a false background.³⁴⁹ Where budget goes to these special sets when need be and fights with swords, etcetera, superhero films put it towards superpower effects and titanic and spectacular set pieces. Budgetary constraints can be attributed to the prevalence of historical films in how they have changed over time as well. Before the advent of CGI, time piece films required much more money to make costumes and sets as opposed to a film that took place during its release period. An easy way to see this is on a smaller scale. A film student in 2024 needs to make a video based on a historical event. It would be much cheaper and easier for them to do a video based on something like a recreation of a walk-out in the 1960s as

³⁴⁶ These films' profits were derived from budgets and box office numbers from "The Numbers." <https://the-numbers.com>.

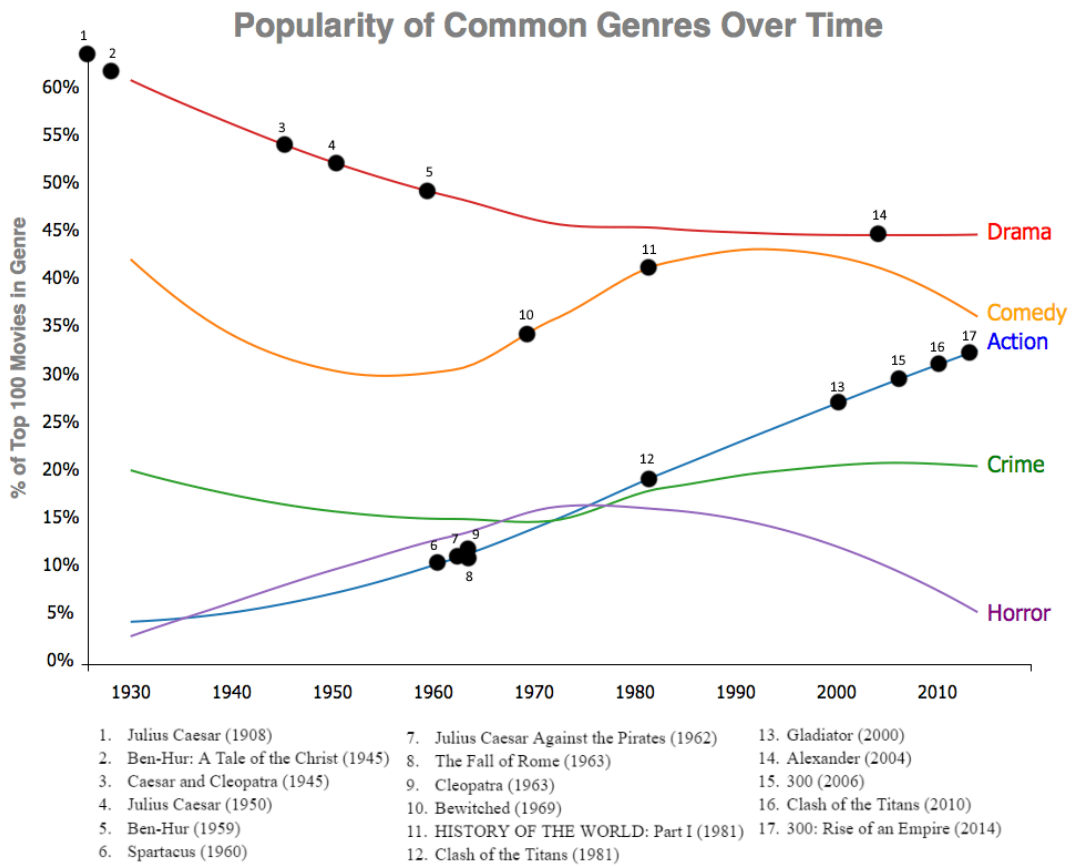
³⁴⁷ "Highest-grossing sword-and-sandals movie." Guinness World Records, accessed February 19, 2024. <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/432850-highest-grossing-sword-and-sandals-movie>.

³⁴⁸ "Highest-grossing sword-and-sandals movie." Guinness World Records.

³⁴⁹ Warner Bros. Entertainment, "300 | A Glimpse from the Set: Making 300 the Movie | Warner Bros. Entertainment." YouTube video, 17:55, October 6, 2020. <https://youtube.com/watch?v=v--r6XKICks>.

opposed to something like the murder of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. It is much easier to recreate something with readily available locations and clothing than with ancient ones.

The effects of changing trends in the film scene could be seen in historical films as early as the 1950s. While drama and comedy have generally stayed the most popular genres of film on average, starting in the 1930s, action films began an average rise in popularity that would become steady in the 1950s without a dip since. In comparison, drama films were in a steady decline from 1930-1970 before entering a relative plateau.³⁵⁰ These trends directly correlate with the films I have talked about in this paper.



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³⁵⁰ Dan Kopf, “The Rise of the Action Movie.” Priceonomics, July 21, 2015, accessed February 21, 2024. <https://www.priceonomics.com/the-rise-of-the-action-movie/>.

³⁵¹ Base graph from: Kopf, “The Rise of the Action Movie.”

As you can see, historical drama in popular films seems to have dropped off with drama films in general leading to the rise of more and more action movies. This opens the door to more films that can be affected by the problems that many of these action films I have talked about face that can hinder their accuracy. Something interesting about the graph though is where *Alexander* is, and it provides a perfect example of how and why filmmakers try to follow trends with many historical films. In the group of films I addressed post 2000, it is the sole drama film. Perhaps the reason for this is that, compared to the other action films, it was a flop. While the film grossed \$167.3 million worldwide, it still only made a \$12 million profit. While still a lot of money, it is measly when compared to the other big films at the time. In part, this is probably because of it going against expectations.

Reviews from the time are extremely negative and describe the film as a long, drawn-out story that is all over the place, confusing, and overly ambitious where *Alexander* is allowed to “talk the world to death”.³⁵² Some reviews are as follows.

“A ponderous death march of a story that seemingly never ends.” Paul Clinton, CNN

A long, lumpy trip with a charismatic guide and some brilliant detours.” -Richard Corliss, TIME Magazine

“Puerile writing, confused plotting and shockingly off-note performances make Oliver Stone’s epic film a disappointment. -Manohla Dargis, New York Times³⁵³

When people go to see a history movie in theaters, especially for a figure like *Alexander the Great*, they usually expect more action than drama.³⁵⁴ While the performance of drama versus action is not applicable to all films, it is still telling of changing times. With how badly this film

³⁵² “*Alexander – Movie Reviews.*” Rotten Tomatoes, accessed February 21, 2024.
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/alexander/reviews?type=top_critics.

³⁵³ “*Alexander – Movie Reviews.*”

³⁵⁴ *Alexander the Great Survey* on page 141.

performed, it is likely a big reason why today we see many history films leaning more towards action rather than dramatic biopics. This in turn leads many people to think of history from a more action-packed standpoint rather than one full of drama and intertwined political issues and relations across the board. When people think of Sparta, they will likely first think of blood-thirsty Spartan warriors like how they are portrayed in *300* rather than what they really were—a powerful Greek city-state focused on highly-trained warriors but also quite skilled in politics with its own rich culture and history. The change of genre popularity, above all, has led to an ancient history that is violent before anything else.

History education has also seen substantial changes during the past several centuries that have likely had direct effects on historical films. As I already mentioned in chapter 4, in the 16th and 17th centuries, children in England like Shakespeare would have learned Latin through historical texts and had direct knowledge from the original language rather than translations that were more likely to contain errors. This introduced people to ancient history from a very young age and would have made them well-informed on recorded topics like biographies of prominent Romans and the *Histories* for example. The teaching of Latin this way would also have transferred into the American colonies and permeated throughout them as well. In this way, writers in both England and the United States would have been learning Latin from ancient texts the same way that modern Italian students in the United States might learn from reading Pinocchio in the original Italian for example. However, while studies of these texts would continue translated in history classes and in the original language for Latin classes, study of the latter would drop with Latin education itself.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁵ Samuel A. Goldberg, “High School Enrollments in Latin, 1964-65.” *The Classical World* 59, no. 9 (1966): 299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4345995>.

In the twentieth century, history education changed a lot in terms of enrollment and offering. Starting in the late nineteenth century, college history education in the United States attempted to move away from rote memorization and towards use of a model where students would use primary source documents—translated into English—to promote critical thinking and debates.³⁵⁶ However, ancient history would still be left in the shadow of more recent histories. Early twentieth century history textbooks by James Harvey Robinson pushed this fact. His textbooks are described as such:

“...the past is subordinated to the present, recent history becomes ‘relevant’ history, the human past becomes the prologue to European history, and Europe is interpreted as the seat of modernity, the source of ‘contemporary ways of doing and thinking’.”³⁵⁷

Much of these ideas of which are still continued to modern day in high schools where Western Civilization courses typically serve solely as ancient to medieval precursors to American history courses that require several years and cover from colonization to modern day. However, at the time, high school history was very different and going through its own changes.

While colleges were changing the way they studied and focusing more on medieval history, high school education was moving away from domineering ancient and American history. In the first decade of the twentieth century, high school history was decompressed from a world history course going from ancient to modern European history to four different classes. From 9th-12th grade, students would start with ancient history, then have European, English, and American history to bridge the gap between ancient and modern, which was previously ignored, and introduce the topic before entering college.³⁵⁸ Across the board in post-primary education, ancient

³⁵⁶ Gilbert Allardyce, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course.” *The American Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (1982): 701. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1864161>.

³⁵⁷ Allardyce, 705.

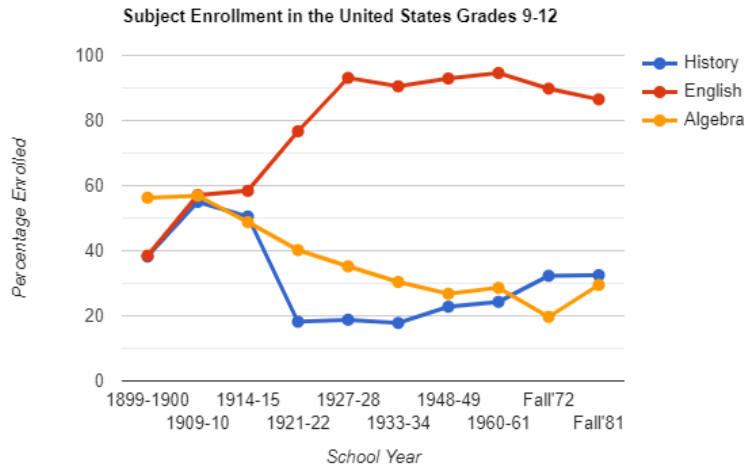
³⁵⁸ Allardyce, 701-702.

history was being put on the backburner to more “important” histories. While this likely saw some kind of effect on the American population at the time, it would have been incredibly small. In the early 1900s, enrollment in secondary education (grades 9-12) was unsurprisingly low and enrollment in postsecondary education was even lower. 1900 saw only four percent of students enrolled in secondary education and one percent in postsecondary education. Between then and 1910, there was a small amount of growth for the former but barely any for the latter.³⁵⁹

Throughout the rest of the century and into more recent decades, post primary education—postsecondary especially—continued to increase at higher rates alongside total school enrollment. However, although enrollment increased significantly, history education increased only marginally. Enrollment in United States and English history in grades 9-12 was recorded from Fall 1889 to Fall 1991 by the National Center for Education Statistics with ancient, medieval, and modern history included from Fall 1889 to Spring 1915. Between the 1914-15 and 1921-22 school years, there is a significant drop in history enrollment from 50.5 to 18.2 percent³⁶⁰ partially attributable to the changes in curriculum and measurement that I have mentioned previously. Though this causes a discrepancy, it is still useful to gauge history enrollment’s trends over time—especially compared to other subjects.

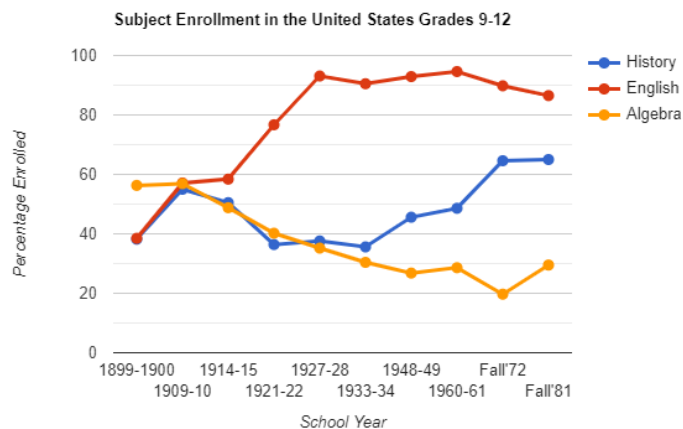
³⁵⁹ “Celebrating 150 Years of Education Data.” NCES Blog. Institute of Education Sciences, September 5, 2018. <https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/celebrating-150-years-of-education-data>.

³⁶⁰ Thomas D. Snyder, “120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait.” *National Center for Education Statistics* (January 1959): 59. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93442.pdf>.



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For this comparison, I chose specific subjects to better correlate the data post-1915. While enrollment in American and English history—half of secondary history education in the twentieth century—saw a slight rise and algebra saw a steady decline, English enrollment usually more than doubled either’s percentage enrolled—even when combined. If we consider that American and English history make up half of high school education with ancient and medieval history making up the other two years, we can theoretically double history enrollment. Even considering enrollment in any history though, it is still greatly overshadowed by English enrollment.



³⁶¹ Data from Snyder, “120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait.” 59.

For data on history education and films as a teaching medium, I conducted three surveys of eight teachers, eight students, and nine students. While these are small sample sizes that are not indicative of the entire United States population, they still have worth in terms of information. The educators span from middle school to college level and have extensive knowledge of the historical knowledge and education scenes—especially in Rhode Island. The students are from varying schools across the country, all at college level, and are of varying majors giving various unique insights into their educational careers and spheres.

In more recent years, high school history has seen a shift towards heavily focusing on American and medieval to present European history rather than ancient history. In a survey of eight students from different schools across Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Florida, and California, only one student (myself) had a mostly dedicated ancient history course (freshman Western Civilization). Six others had only had some form of world history instead.³⁶² This is extremely telling of how much importance high schools put on ancient history today in that it is usually is restricted to a class that covers from the beginnings of civilization to modern day.

In these cases, World History would typically cover from 4000 BCE to modern day. That is 6000 years in ten months. From Mesopotamia to the end of the Roman Empire might be covered in anywhere between 2-4 months—the latter value being the usual length of a college course. Meanwhile, such a course might only cover from the late Roman Republic at the beginning of the first century BCE to the end of the empire in the late fifth century. My high school western civilization class, for example, over ten months was supposed to cover from Mesopotamia into the Middle Ages, but we only reached the end of the Roman Empire and the start of the Byzantine

³⁶² History Classes in High School Survey on page 142.

Empire in the allotted ten-month school year. From my own experiences as well, from grade 6-11, two-thirds of my required courses were some form of United States history and senior history was not even required at my or many other survey participants' high schools. My only option as a senior was AP European history which covered from the Middle Ages to modern day.

There are extensive national standards for world history, but they do not necessarily ensure a thorough education in ancient history. Each “era” has its own standards and sub-standards but there are several problems here. The first is that national standards call for at least three years of world history from grades 5-12 that covers anywhere from 4000 BCE to modern day.³⁶³ Not all standards need to be met, either. The standards are only “intended as a guide and resource... not meant to serve as a prescribed syllabus”³⁶⁴. The standards covering eight school years and simply requiring three of them to be world history—potentially covering three different schools as well—opens the door for large gaps to be left in historical knowledge. For example, my education only included Eras 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9 with 6-9 being only American history parts. If not for AP Euro, I never would have learned any European history between the fourth century and 1914 with the start of World War I. I would not learn any kind of African or Asian history outside of the Pacific Conflict until my junior and senior years of college respectively.

Most of the standards cover grades 5-12 or 7-12 as well³⁶⁵, creating a fluidity of where things can be learned and allowing more history to be moved to lower levels—possibly even removed from high school education entirely, or crammed into a single year. The latter is likely why most students I surveyed said they took a “world history” course³⁶⁶ and not an “ancient

³⁶³ “World History Content Standards.” Public History Initiative, University of California Los Angeles, accessed March 2, 2024. <https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/world-history-content-standards/>.

³⁶⁴ “World History Content Standards.” Public History Initiative.

³⁶⁵ “World History Content Standards.” Public History Initiative.

³⁶⁶ History Classes in High School Survey on page 142.

history” or “western civilizations” course. Even in the 1940’s, from grades 7-12, only one was “world history”—the rest were geography, civics, current events, and United States history—and that was in grade ten.³⁶⁷ Now, based on survey results, ancient history seems to have typically moved down to an introductory freshman course similar to physical science—a wide encompassing course that covers many different disciplines and subjects³⁶⁸. The decrease in high school history is reflected by what mandatory courses the students in my survey took. Of eight, two only had two years of history and six only had three.³⁶⁹ From this, we can see that, in a way, history at the high school level has actually decreased in some schools—possibly due to how fluid national standards are.

One high school educator I surveyed provides other reasoning as well. They state that “[E]ducation has become too focused on current events. Ancient history is difficult and dense at times [and] often curriculums will disregard ancient history as ‘unimportant’.”³⁷⁰ A college professor I surveyed answered with more information in relation to this: “Ancient History is seen as less important and necessary and modern history gets more attention.”³⁷¹ Both of these statements are applicable to either education level. They make sense though since you obviously want students to have knowledge of the world and country they are currently living in, but it leaves

³⁶⁷ Edgard B. Wesley, “American History in Schools and Colleges (1944).” Chapter 3: “American History in the Classroom.” American History Association, The Macmillan Company; New York, 1944. From [https://historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/american-history-in-schools-and-colleges-\(1944\)/chapter-3-american-history-in-the-classroom](https://historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/american-history-in-schools-and-colleges-(1944)/chapter-3-american-history-in-the-classroom).

³⁶⁸ This can be found by looking up the course contents both at high school and college level on Google. One example is: Ryan Strickland, “PHYSICAL SCIENCE COURSE SYLLABUS.” Thomas County Central High School, Thomas County School District, Georgia. 2015. From: <https://www.thomas.k12.ga.us/userfiles/785/Classes/68126/PHYSICAL%20SCIENCE%20COURSE%20SYLLABUS-0.pdf>.

³⁶⁹ History Classes in High School Survey on page 142.

³⁷⁰ Eric Izzi, in response to “Do you think there has been a decline in ancient history in the education system?” Teacher Survey on page 135.

³⁷¹ Dr. Elisa Miller, in response to “Do you think there has been a decline in ancient history in the education system?” Teacher Survey on page 135.

out connections to where they came from. Ancient history should not be unimportant or serve only as a mere precursor to United States or modern history. It should be seen as a large part of what has gotten humanity to where it is today with connections drawn between the past and present as to what history repeats, what has direct effects on us today and/or what has changed. This decreasing of history—ancient especially—in high school is telling of even bigger issues at higher education levels.

From 2007 to 2019, the amount of bachelor’s degrees received in history—history, history education, and history preservation—has dropped to a number just below where it was at the beginning of the century and has been in a steady decline in terms of the total percentage of bachelor’s degrees earned. From peaks of about 36,000 degrees earned in 2010 and 2012, the amount decreased to barely above 23,923 in 2019. In 2007, history bachelor’s made up about 2.4 percent of all degrees and in 2019 that number dwindled to under 1.25 percent.³⁷² These decreases may likely be explained by factors such as higher paying fields after the 2008 financial crisis but are simply another telling sign that there is a decrease in historical knowledge across the board in the United States. Enrollment, emphasis, test scores³⁷³, and ultimately historical knowledge have all been in decline in recent years begging the question of how these changes have affected the film scene.

For a majority of the films I have analyzed in this paper, when they were released, history was on the rise. Many of the filmmakers and their audiences would likely have had some kind of

³⁷² Robert B. Townsend, “Has the Decline in History Majors Hit Bottom?” *Perspectives on History*: (March 2021). American History Association, February 23, 2021. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/march-2021/has-the-decline-in-history-majors-hit-bottom-data-from-2018%E2%80%9319-show-lowest-number-since-1980>.

³⁷³ “NAEP Report Card: 2022 NAEP U.S. History Assessment.” The Nation’s Report Card, accessed February 24, 2024. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ushistory/2022/>.

history education/knowledge with it growing as time went on. With greater historical knowledge, one might think that film makers are held to somewhat higher standards of upholding historical accuracy while also creating an engaging story that will bring audiences to a theater. However, this is not necessarily the case. With more historical knowledge, film makers might feel freer to explore and lean into the film's genre or change certain aspects. For example, the story of Spartacus is not extensive or well-known historically but, because of a lack of extensive knowledge about him, filmmakers were able to flesh out his character to fit their narrative and chosen genre. The same could be said for Leonidas or Perseus—now being part of the American pop culture zeitgeist—and Artemisia who is also not very prominent in history education/knowledge.

Expecting the audience to have more knowledge of historical subjects can be just as freeing as well. This is especially the case with tales like Perseus' or Ben-Hur where their stories have already been told on film so with that and more historical knowledge, they have more room to “have fun” with the stories and historical characters in the remakes. A more historical case is *300: Rise of an Empire* and how it rewrites both history and historical figures to make the story more entertaining. Typically, a Greek history course would cover the Persian Wars so it is likely that audiences would at least know a rough timeline of the war—especially after the first *300* film's success. The best example of this idea is how Biblical figures are portrayed in *HISTORY OF THE WORLD: Part II* with them all being dark-skinned or how Jesus is portrayed more realistic in *Ben-Hur* (2016) since most people already have at least a basic knowledge of these figures. The same goes for Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great—both of whom are typically given special attention in ancient history classes. However, with the decline of ancient history in higher education—and history as a whole—one must wonder if the United States could return to a point where many people do not know much about it and will either be taught or taken advantage of by

the film medium even more. Ultimately though, a correlation between growing historical knowledge and a declining “accuracy” of historical films is seen most in recent years but can fluctuate and depends on the subject and how the film makers view their audiences. The real issues come with the growth of history education in relation to changes in film popularity, the accuracies and inaccuracies of films in general, and teaching methods/mediums.

Filmed media has been a part of the American educational system since the 1970s starting with VHS and sometimes Laserdisc³⁷⁴ before moving to DVD, Blu-ray, and ultimately online video streaming services like YouTube. With this medium only becoming more affordable and accessible—YouTube is completely free after all—it easily permeated into all corners of the education scene. It is not rare for classes to use DVDs, YouTube videos, or other online videos as supplementary or even full lesson materials. Lessons might even be formed around filmed media with there being scholarly articles³⁷⁵ and even entire chapters in history teaching handbooks³⁷⁶ about doing so.

In 2010, the American History Association recorded that forty-six to forty-seven percent of teachers used an internet connection, DVD or VHS players, and/or video projectors.³⁷⁷ Use of technology has only increased since then, especially post 2020 with many federal initiatives to

³⁷⁴ Syed M.S. Haque, “Video Applications in Education.” *Educational Technology* 18, no. 9 (1978): 28-29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44419212>.

³⁷⁵ Paul B. Weinstein, “Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project.” *The History Teacher* 35, no. 1 (2001): 27-48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3054508>.

³⁷⁶ Scott Alan Metzger and Lauren McArthur Harris, “The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning.” Wiley Online Library, accessed February 21, 2024. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781119100812>.

³⁷⁷ Robert B. Townsend, “Assimilation of New Media Into History Teaching: Some Snapshots From the Edge.” *Perspectives on History* (December 2010). American History Association, December 1, 2010. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/december-2010/assimilation-of-new-media-into-history-teaching>.

support digital learning such as the CARES Act and the E-Rate Program³⁷⁸. There are also smaller initiatives funded by state governments—like Rhode Island’s 21st Century Technology and Equipment Fund³⁷⁹—and private organizations like One Laptop Per Child³⁸⁰ that help introduce technology into schools as well. In a 2023 survey of eight teachers in North Providence and Providence, Rhode Island—two middle school, three high school, three college—seven of them said they use filmed media as a teaching medium and four specified that it was only as a supplement to other materials. This is usually through films like *Birth of a Nation*, *The Black Robe*, *A Knight’s Tale*, *The Florida Project*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Gladiator*³⁸¹, and even *300*³⁸².

Eight students also answered a survey about their feelings on filmed media in teaching. All eight said they like it as a teaching medium and seventy-five percent said they believe they learn better from it—the other twenty-five percent was unsure.³⁸³ This is mostly due to one of the biggest advantages of the medium in that it teaches visually. This is an idea relayed repeatedly by surveyed students³⁸⁴, teachers³⁸⁵, and even academic articles³⁸⁶. Through teaching history specifically through filmed media, it provides a chance for students to learn history by “seeing” it brought to life. It also oftentimes is more engaging and allows them to learn through pop culture and a medium that has permeated their lives as well. In 2019, the American History Association reported what sources Americans got their history from the most. The top two answers in this report were

³⁷⁸ “Funding Digital Learning.” Office of Educational Technology, United States Department of Education, accessed February 24, 2024. <https://tech.ed.gov/funding/>.

³⁷⁹ “OPLC.” One Laptop Per Child, accessed February 24, 2024. <https://laptop.org>.

³⁸⁰ “21st Century Technology and Equipment Fund.” Rhode Island Department of Education, accessed February 24, 2024. <https://ride.ri.gov/funding-finance/school-building-authority/technology-equipment-fund>.

³⁸¹ Teacher Survey on page 132.

³⁸² Student Survey 1 on page 137.

³⁸³ Student Survey 1 on page 136.

³⁸⁴ Student Survey 1 on page 138.

³⁸⁵ Teacher Survey on page 134.

³⁸⁶ Cynthia J. Brame, “Effective Educational Videos: Principles and Guidelines for Maximizing Student Learning from Video Content.” CBE Life Sciences Education, National Library of Medicine, October 13, 2017. <https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5132380/>.

“Documentary film/TV” (69%) and “Fictional film/TV” (66%).³⁸⁷ Filmed media for learning is not only affordable for teachers, but the general public and even students as well. For \$6.99 per month³⁸⁸, one can gain access to a plethora of historical films, both fiction and nonfiction, through Netflix and have access to them at any time. YouTube lessens this cost even more, being completely free, and having a multitude of educational history channels like Crash Course³⁸⁹ and uploads of movie clips.

However, there are many issues with filmed media being a teaching medium both inside and outside of the classroom. Many of the teachers and students I surveyed repeated many of the same issues with the medium that I have talked about in this essay. These films are full of biases, minor inaccuracies and changes for entertainment’s sake that can have large impacts, and inaccuracies and fictional narratives that can easily be confused as fact. One student’s answer to the disadvantages of films in education deserves special attention in how important it is. They responded that “[T]hey can be used to make different sides of history look better by media manipulation”³⁹⁰. This is a point that I want to drive home in this chapter.

Students love films—they are the largest group of moviegoers after all³⁹¹. At younger ages as well, they are more likely to soak in all the information shown to them on the screen—especially if it is particularly engaging, shocking, or spectacular. This is why superhero films have become so prevalent in modern pop culture alongside other action movies. With action movies being the most popular films, many ancient history films used in education being of this genre, and so many

³⁸⁷ Pete Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, “A Snapshot of the Public’s Views on History.” *Perspectives on History*: (September 2021). American History Association, August 30, 2021. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2021/a-snapshot-of-the-publics-views-on-history-national-poll-offers-valuable-insights-for-historians-and-advocates>.

³⁸⁸ “Plans and Pricing.” Netflix, accessed February 26, 2024. <https://help.netflix.com/en/node/24926>.

³⁸⁹ “Crash Course.” Crash Course, accessed February 26, 2024. <https://thecrashcourse.com/>.

³⁹⁰ Student Survey 1 on page 139.

³⁹¹ “Theatrical Market Statistics 2016.” Motion Picture Association of America.

people learning from filmed media, a perfect storm against historical memory has been formed. It is now more dangerous than ever for history, especially ancient history, to turn into an action movie. There is also a large danger of the spreading of any personal agendas instilled in films into the larger population and creating the highest potential ever for the rewriting of history from the bottom up in age groups. Imagine if *Queen Cleopatra* was viewed by young children nationwide and they never saw other sides of the debate about Cleopatra's skin color and the Ptolemies' policies. That would then essentially rewrite the figure's history in the United States. Thankfully, there are easy ways to combat the negative aspects of filmed media and even turn them into positives through the educational sphere.

The linchpin of combating damage to historical memory through filmed media is education. This can be done in two ways: educating students on inaccuracies or changes to films shown to them and educating students on being skeptical and looking into potential inaccuracies or changes in films. If students are told about inaccuracies, biases, or changes made to history films before, during, or immediately after viewing, they are less likely to instill them as potential truths. They could even be used as opportunities for further learning. With *Queen Cleopatra*, teachers could take advantage of the series to explain how different ideas about the figure, her family, and her world exist, where these ideas came from, and how it explains modern ideas like changes in social and racial trends in the United States. It is just as important, if not more important, that students learn to do this on their own as well since they will not be in school forever. They must learn to think about and investigate their world—specifically films in this case—on their own. They also will be the ones raising future generations and passing on this information and these skills to them. Thankfully, it seems that both ideas are in implementation for current generations.

Of the teachers I surveyed, all said they assess the accuracy of historical films before they present them and explain any inaccuracies or changes made to their classes. They usually have lessons surrounding this³⁹² and publications exist outlining these assignments as well.³⁹³ For students, all said that they think about the accuracy of historical films, but only five out of eight said they look into anything they think is inaccurate³⁹⁴—which is still a start and over half. Without the educational sphere, any inaccuracies and implanted biases will stay exactly that. They will not be investigated. They will not be questioned. History will only continue to be molded into an action movie or drama of important men and some women. It is up to educators, the educated, and historians to watch trends in both films and education to ensure that history continues to be investigated and films are not regarded as full truths and writing history themselves.

³⁹² Teacher Survey on page 133.

³⁹³ Weinstein, “Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project.”

³⁹⁴ Student Survey 1 on page 137.

CHAPTER 9: FINAL THOUGHTS; WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

A main takeaway that I want to present in this paper is that one cannot say that history movies are getting more or less accurate to the historical record over time. It is not that simple. Not every film is one-hundred percent accurate, nor are they trying to be. The main point of these films is above all to make money through entertainment and then do other things like push an agenda, make a modern-day comparison, or retell history differently. However, what is noticeable is certain trends of what things are typically accurate and inaccurate in various genres and to what degrees. Either way, whatever trends may or may not exist, us—the public, historians, educators, students—must be careful of what information we are taking in through filmed media. Special care must also be given to considering current historical trends when new films are released. While some of these are good—like acknowledging women’s roles or viewing religious histories from nonsecular viewpoints—some are also not so good—like censorship of slavery in the Southern United States. We must not only be careful of these trends appearing in already made films, but also that they do not make it into them in the first place. Things could even be censored now for all we know. After all, it took several decades for the world to find out about mass starvation in China in the 1960s.³⁹⁵

This is not to say that all films should be completely accurate, though. That is an unrealistic expectation and would restrict history to looking only like documentaries, not filling in any blanks, and not providing any new spins on it. It would also be hard to be completely accurate when there is much of history that is still debated. What is important is historical education to prevent

³⁹⁵ Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund. “Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong about the World – and Why Things Are Better than You Think” (London, England: Sceptre. 2019): 55-56.

historical inaccuracy from becoming historical memory. This is especially the case for ancient history for multiple reasons. The first reason is that it is so far detached from modern day and no one alive lived anywhere near the time period. The other is that ancient historical education and historical knowledge in general are declining. Together, these make it much easier to manipulate historical memory of ancient history.

In fact, ancient history education, history education, and historical knowledge as a whole are at a crossroads right now. In the survey I conducted of eight teachers, three said there has been a decline in ancient history in the education system, two said no, and the other three were unsure or did not answer. Six also responded that engagement in history classes is not dropping but six also stated that historical knowledge is declining.³⁹⁶ In stark contrast, six out of eight students said ancient history is in decline, all said engagement in history classes is dropping, and six said that historical knowledge is declining with the other two not being sure.³⁹⁷

From these educators' points of view, the outlook for history education seems much better than it does from students' points of view. The reasoning that I see for this is that history educators only see from that point of view. Meanwhile, students may see these classes from the point of view of those from other majors and they interact with the student body and their thoughts more than an educator would. They are also the ones who have taken varying levels of history classes throughout their academic careers and talked to others about their experiences in school as well. In this way, they are a better gauge at ancient history's hold on students and its prevalence in different areas and at various levels. Students will typically have some kind of connection to students outside of their own school, but teachers do not necessarily always have connections to teachers outside of

³⁹⁶ Teacher Survey on page 135.

³⁹⁷ Student Survey 1 on page 140.

their own school or district. Educators are a better gauge for historical knowledge though as it is typically their job to assess the historical knowledge of their students in the subjects they teach. They are also more intertwined with the larger historical world and would know what is going on in it.

Two things are important to note, however, in that engagement in class does not directly translate to historical knowledge and that engagement directly correlates to how the current United States education system works. Right now, this country tends to teach to a test. Students learn the knowledge, memorize it for an assessment, then forget about it within a year. With multiple choice, true or false, and fill-in-the-blank questions, we are also encouraging students simply to remember and not know things. There are a plethora of articles, even by the National Education Association³⁹⁸, about why standardized tests and focus on tests in general can be bad for students and their learning. If you ask any student who took an ancient history course who Julius Caesar fought in the Roman civil war and why, they probably cannot answer even though they more likely than not learned it with its importance in ancient Roman history. I can provide a personal example as well. I failed my states and capitals test the first time I took in in fourth grade with only two correct because I did not study. That night I studied until I went to bed so I could retake it the next day and got forty or so right. Today, I would be lucky if I could tell you the capitals of five states.

There are plenty of articles and research explaining how teaching to a test is bad and this is likely a big part of why historical knowledge is declining. Yet, even in standardized tests, students' scores in history have been declining for years.³⁹⁹ There are also plenty of articles by

³⁹⁸ Cindy Long, "Standardized Testing Is Still Failing Students." NEA, March 30, 2023. <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/standardized-testing-still-failing-students>.

³⁹⁹ "NAEP Report Card: 2022 NAEP U.S. History Assessment." The Nation's Report Card.

sources like the American Heritage Society⁴⁰⁰, Forbes⁴⁰¹, and The New Yorker⁴⁰² about declines in historical thinking, knowledge, and literacy. One college professor I surveyed put it best stating, “Americans have tended over time to be ahistorical. The current political climate that we live in tends to reinforce that trend.”⁴⁰³ People simply seem to not care about history anymore. This is especially visible today with how history is repeating across the globe and is widely unaddressed. Several events in recent decades directly mirror the past. One example of this is a striking resemblance between the January 6 attack on the United States Capitol and the Catiline Revolt. In 63 BCE, Lucius Catiline lost an election for consul and responded by leaving the capital and taking command of a northern militia while his followers stayed behind with orders to attack the city and kill its officials leading to many bloody battles before the revolt was stopped.⁴⁰⁴ Another example is Russia’s invasion of Ukraine being similar in both reasoning and scale to Germany’s invasion of Poland prior to World War II.⁴⁰⁵ In the interest of my paper’s topic however, the ahistorical nature of the United States is especially important when it comes to historical films.

Both inside and outside the educational sphere, if people are not concerned about history, they are likely to just take these films at face value. Though the students I surveyed mostly said they would check film accuracy, this is only a small sample and does not speak to the larger context of age groups and people throughout the United States. This is why education is so important at these crossroads of history. It is the job of educators to teach students how films are not always

⁴⁰⁰ “Reversing the Decline in Historical and Civic Literacy.” American Heritage Society, accessed March 2, 2024. <http://ahsociety.org/content/reversing-decline-historical-and-civic-literacy>.

⁴⁰¹ Natalie Wexler, “Why Kids Know Even Less about History Now-and Why It Matters.” Forbes, April 24, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliewexler/2020/04/24/why-kids-know-even-less-about-history-now-and-why-it-matters/?sh=7dba8cd66a7a>.

⁴⁰² Eric Alterman, “The Decline of Historical Thinking.” The New Yorker, February 4, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-decline-of-historical-thinking>.

⁴⁰³ Dr. Karl Benziger. Teacher Survey on page 135.

⁴⁰⁴ Sallust, *The War With Catiline*. 18, 24, 26-27, 36-37, 40-43, 61-62. [Trans. Thayer].

⁴⁰⁵ We are once again seeing a larger power trying to conquer previously owned lands with the rest of the world being unsure what to do about it besides condemn them and help on the side (especially the United States).

accurate and that they need to assess their contents and meanings. In other words, they must instill skills of critical and historical thinking and analysis into students to prevent the poisoning of the well that historical memory and knowledge creates. A great, though not necessarily bad, example of this is Medusa. As I addressed in chapter 2, *Clash of the Titans* (1981) was the first instance of the character having a snake tail instead of legs which is how she is typically viewed today. One sole instance changed the entire presentation of a character in historical memory. It only takes one drop to completely taint the water supply.

In this way, we can see the potential dangers that something like *Queen Cleopatra* can pose to historical memory. Where many people learn history from filmed media⁴⁰⁶ and streaming services like Netflix are more popular than cable⁴⁰⁷ and readily available than theaters, the contents of a series like this could easily become exceedingly popular and widespread in a short amount of time. We have already seen these explosions with shows like *Stranger Things*⁴⁰⁸ and *Wednesday*⁴⁰⁹. Without the discourse it caused, the series could have easily made a black Cleopatra, Ptolemy family, and Alexandria a widely accepted and believed idea if it blew up like the two examples I just mentioned. It might have spread even faster thanks to things like Black History Month and the Black Power Movement. *Queen Cleopatra* could have completely changed the way people viewed the figure, her world, and her history for the worse and the same could happen for any other figure, period, or history as well.

⁴⁰⁶ Pete Burkholder and Dana Schaffer. "A Snapshot of the Public's Views on History."

⁴⁰⁷ Felix Richter, "Infographic: Streaming Accounts for Nearly 40% of U.S. TV Consumption." Statista Daily Data, November 21, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/chart/25381/tv-consumption-in-the-us-by-channel/>.

⁴⁰⁸ "Google Trends (n.d.), search volume for Stranger Things between January 1, 2015 and January 1, 2017 with its release on July 15, 2016." <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2015-01-01%202017-01-01&geo=US&q=Stranger%20Things&hl=en>.

⁴⁰⁹ "Google Trends (n.d.), search volume for Wednesday between January 1, 2022 and January 1, 2024 with its release date on November 23, 2022." <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2022-01-01%202024-01-01&geo=US&q=Wednesday&hl=en>.

This is why, again, it is so important for educators to ensure that the coming generations know better. They need to know how to critically assess and analyze media both inside and outside of the classroom both in terms of history and in general. This is not a case that is unique to history or film. Any media of any kind could change the view of anything. It is up to educators to ensure that students have the skills and tools required to get through a world full of clickbait, embellishment, entertainment, and gossip to sift out the truths. This is especially the case when the media is viewed in the academic space since students rely on knowledge passed on by teachers to be the truth. When I was shown *Gladiator* in 9th grade, I was told it was fictional but visually accurate to what gladiators and gladiatorial combat is believed to have looked like. Contrarily, when I was shown parts of *300*, it was never explained how the film was based on a comic book and not necessarily the historical record. I did not learn the latter until much later. Until then, I believed the film to be accurate to history and spent several hours trying to figure out where the “Sparta pit” was located and how nobody had fallen into it and died.

In order to turn around the downward trend history has taken, several things must occur. First, history education needs to focus more on capturing students’ interests and fostering learning rather than teaching to a test. This will help raise classroom engagement, thereby fostering better learning and reversing declines in historical knowledge. Second, a bigger emphasis must be put on ancient history to foster knowledge in that content area to help better connect the past to the present and provide a context for ancient historical films. Third, and finally, educators at all levels must ensure that their students are aware of any inaccuracies or changes in the films that they show and that they are provided with the knowledge and tools necessary to do so themselves as well. By doing this, not only will historical knowledge and ancient history education increase, but historical

memory will also have a much better chance against the negative effects a piece of media can have when its audience is ignorant to its errors.

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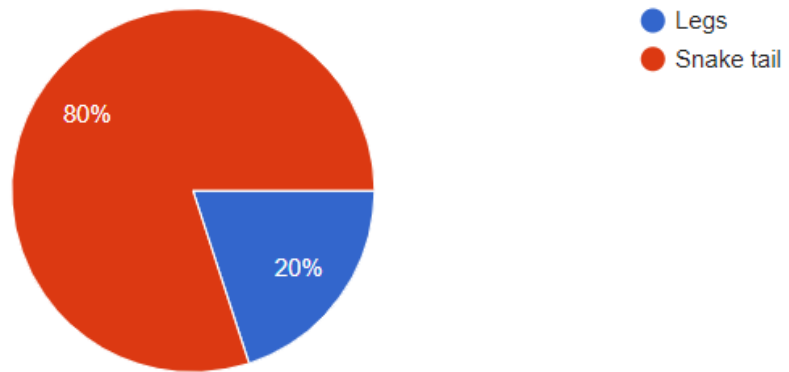
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Survey Results

Medusa Survey

Do you think of Medusa as having which of these?

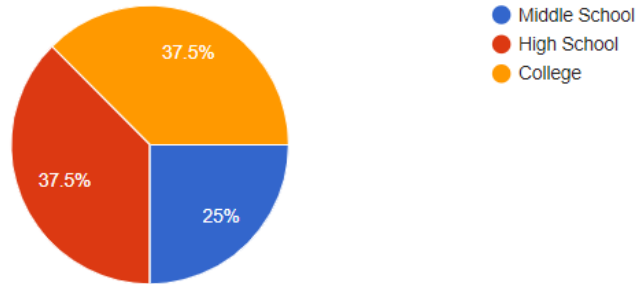
10 responses



Teacher Survey

What education level do you teach?

8 responses



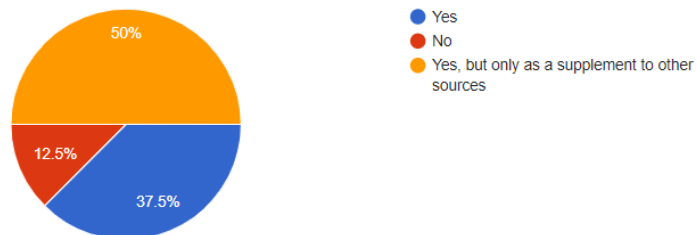
What course(s) do you teach?

8 responses

- 7th grade civics & govt, 8th grade ancient cultures
- Gender and Women's Studies, FYS, History 282
- American Studies (American History 1492-1877) and Reel History (History through Film 1900-present)
- Western Civilization and AP European History
- Western Civ, Psychology
- History: 107, 218, 336 281, 268, 562, 561
- civics and government and ancient civilizations
- a wide variety of U.S. history courses, first year seminars, and historical methods courses

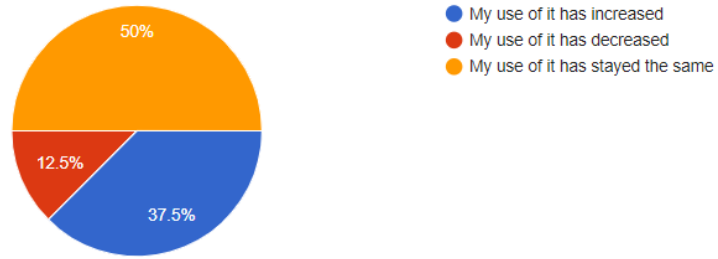
Do you use filmed media as a teaching medium?

8 responses



How has your use of filmed media as a teaching resource changed over time?

8 responses



What are some films that you show in your classes?

7 responses

We utilize online supplementary video clips from Kahn academy, discovery education, YouTube, National Geographic. We do not view full length films

Inequality for All, The Florida Project, Roger and Me

Glory, The Great Gatsby, Saving Private Ryan, A League of their Own, Schindler's List, etc

Kingdom of Heaven, Valkyrie, Clips from Gladiator, Clips from Schindler's List, various documentaries.

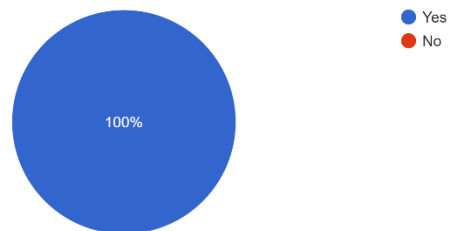
A Knight's Tale, Girl Interrupted, Inside Out, Parenthood

The Black Robe, Invasion of the Body Snatchers

I usually show only clips of films and not full films. Ex. Birth of a Nation, Gone with the Wind, Charlie Chaplin films, Hamilton

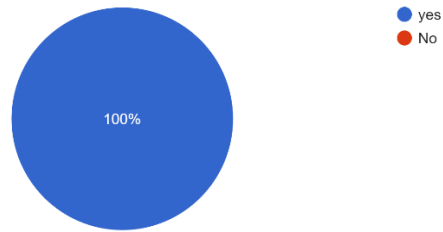
Do you assess the accuracy of historical films before you present them?

7 responses



Do you explain any inaccuracies or changes made in media you present to your class?

7 responses



Do you have any assignments or discussions when you show films? If so, please feel free to provide an example.

7 responses

Yes, we discuss video clips. For example, I discuss the meaning of historical fiction

I often provide reading guides for students to think about

Yes. I always use a reflective essay that asks students to discuss the historical accuracy/inaccuracy of the film and elements that are for Hollywood's purpose and entertainment versus reality

No. Its strictly as supplemental material to reinforce content.

Yes

Longer Paper #2: How does "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" portray post W.W. II unease in the United States? What happens if we fall asleep? Why do neighbors feel the need to search for an enemy within? How similar is this story to "The Monsters are Due on Main Street?" Providing specific examples how does this story correspond to the Age of McCarthyism? Be sure to draw parallels to the Salem Witch Hunt?

We always have discussions about the clips of films we watch. I make clear that these are not meant to be accurate depictions but important to analyze how and why they depict themes and issues in history. I've had students analyze films for a paper assignment before and discuss how the film represents the issues and concerns of the period of history that it was produced in.

What do you think are the advantages to using filmed media as a teaching medium?

8 responses

Students, particularly at the middle level, need to "see" history to understand and expand comprehension.

often more engaging, shows personal stories,

Provides a visual for the student to see what it was "like" to live in a different time period. It is our closest retelling of eras in history that we will never have experienced for ourselves.

If used responsibly in the classroom, films allow us to go beyond dry facts and helps to bring certain events of history "alive".

It allows students to see a first hand view of the experiences they are learning about in class

When used in the context of a course it provides yet another avenue to get at some of the principle themes and concepts through a popular media.

History coming to life. Students like that medium.

Students often passively watch popular culture and I want them to think critically about it and its impact on them and society. It can also be a good way to engage students in discussion and analysis.

What do you think are the disadvantages to using filmed media as a teaching medium?

7 responses

short videos are great for introducing students to alternate perspectives and to introducing issues quickly.

There are anachronisms and additions and subtractions to films for entertainment's sake

We can fall into using films to strictly teach content. Most of the time there are historical inaccuracies and/or fictional narratives found in many historical films that students will confuse as "facts".

Even minor inaccuracies can make a large impact on how a viewer understands an event

I don't see any. I use a wide range of media in the classroom and filmed media is simply another tool in my teaching kit.

Plenty of bias and Hollywood enhances facts.

It can take up too much time in class. Students can default to seeing it as "true"

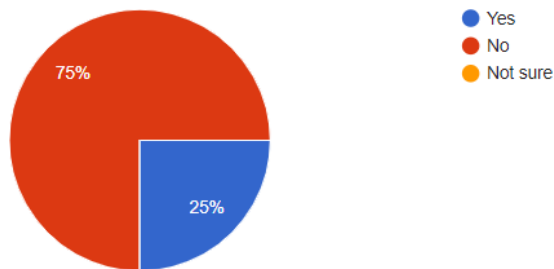
Do you think there has been a decline in ancient history in the education system?

8 responses

No
NA
Not in our scope and sequence in North Providence.
100% yes. Education has become too focused on current events. Ancient history is difficult and dense at times often curriculums will disregard ancient history as "unimportant".
Yes
Probably.
I don't know but that's what I teach.
absolutely. There's a decrease in teaching of history in general and I think Ancient History is seen as less important and necessary and modern history gets more attention.

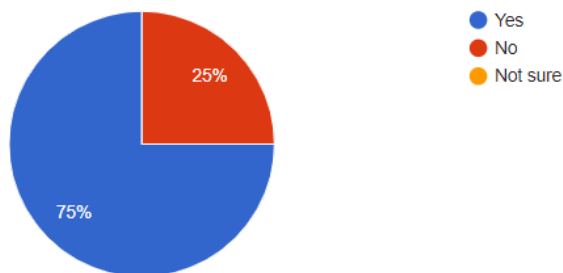
Do you believe that engagement in history classes is dropping?

8 responses



Do you believe that historical knowledge is declining?

8 responses



Do you have any comments or concerns? Please specify if you would like to open up a conversation and I will get back to you as soon as I can.

3 responses

Americans have tended over time to be ahistorical. The current political climate that we live in tends to reinforce that trend.

Student Survey 1

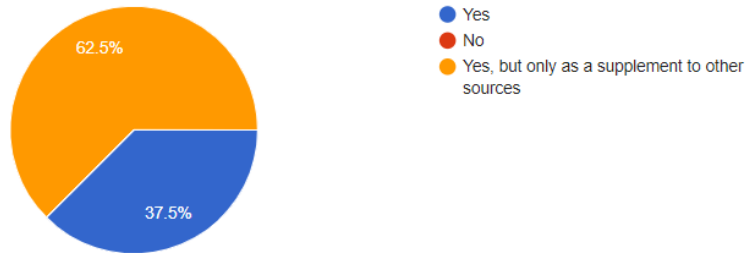
What history course(s) have you taken?

8 responses

west and the world 1+2, the world after 1500, American revolution studies
World and European
APUSH, law and judicial process, general history class in high school
The normal high school stuff
In college, only Western Civ.
History Matters 1 & 2, roman empire, colonization of Africa, cold war and beyond, American colonial history
History Through Film
Women in American history, all Anthropology classes for masters, CRM, Historical preservation, etc.

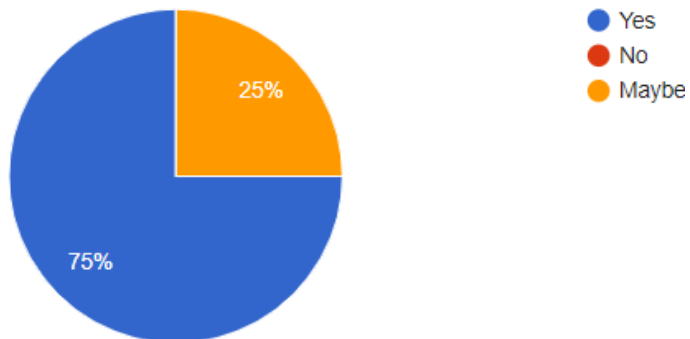
Do you like filmed media as a teaching medium?

8 responses



Do you find that you learn better from filmed media?

8 responses



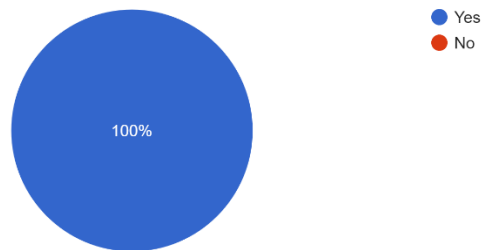
What are some films that you have seen in your classes?

8 responses

- Saving Private ryan, monument men, les miserables
- History music paradies. Extra History (youtube channel)
- (One might've been about DDAY idk, maybe one was Forrest Gump idk if that counts) I don't remember them, they weren't interesting to me, the only ones were in the general history class.
- The 300
- N/A
- Mau Mau, fiery autumn
- Saving Private Ryan, Forest Gump, Patriots Day, Patriot, Hacksaw Ridge,
- Multiple you tube videos about people of the southwest and hunter gatherer societies.

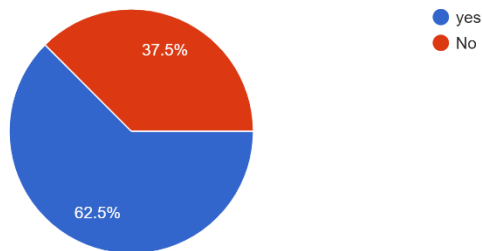
Do you ever think about the accuracy of historical films?

8 responses



Do you look into anything you might think is inaccurate?

8 responses



Do you have any assignments or discussions when you are shown films? If so, please feel free to provide an example.

8 responses

I am a comms major and in one of the books we are doing for race, class and gender we are pairing a movie to the information we are reading. it helps give us a better idea of the overall topic.

Yes usually involving doing a write up or reflection on the film

Mainly answering simple questions or what you thought about it.

Usually a paper

I showed parts of Jurassic Park while student teaching a biology class to highlight how our views of dinosaurs change throughout history as we discover more information about them through discovery of new fossils. We compared the representations in the film to the modern documentary, Prehistoric Planet to see how much our views of these creatures have changed with the gain of new scientific knowledge. I also used the film to highlight genetic sequencing and mutations in DNA.

Had a paper too write in my Africa class on the mau Mau rebellion and I had questions that dealt with the British treatment of local Kenyans and the rebels they tortured

Typically, assignments that make sure that you pay attention and not asleep.

Filmed documentaries about ethnographic studies of hunter gatherer societies.

What do you think are the advantages to using filmed media as a teaching medium?

8 responses

Many people, especially now, learn through visuals. Giving them a mostly accurate depiction of what they are learning can further benefit their understanding of the material.

It provides visuals that can complement lessons, keep students attention, and allow for more information to be delivered to the viewer at once.

If students need more visuals than just some pictures, if there is accuracy to the perspective of the characters in the movie that could be helpful to see too.

Visual examples to follow instead of thinking of things from reading text

Filmed media can help make teaching more engaging

To show different perspectives and evidence of historical events

Tried and tested films that can pass enough to make it to cinema, whether that be enhanced to be entertaining and to be true enough to pass.

Not everyone learns the same way. Film engages all the senses, and is more entertaining than dry readings.

What do you think are the disadvantages to using filmed media as a teaching medium?

8 responses

Correctness is definitely one. If there are some facts that are simply not true that could skew peoples views on the topic and give them the wrong information.

It can cause a disconnect as the professor can not involve themselves in the lessons if everything is recorded or in film content

If there are inaccuracies that students remember then they didn't actually learn what happened. Sometimes things are altered so that the movie flows better rather than staying completely rruer to what happened

The "Oh boy tv time" mentality from students

Sometimes information relayed through filmed media isn't always 100% accurate.

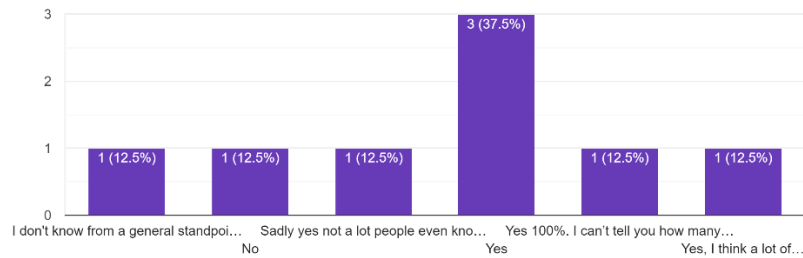
They can be used to make different sides of history look better by media manipulation

There are some enhanced aspects that take away from the happenings.

It is not typically peer reviewed and contains bias.

Do you think there has been a decline in ancient history in the education system?

8 responses



Yes, I think a lot of teachers have a difficult time making history engaging for students so it's not as much as a focus as it could be.

1 response

Sadly yes not a lot people even know basically history which is just sad

1 response

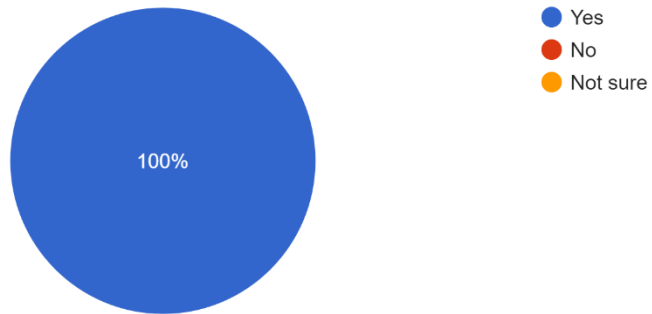
I don't know from a general standpoint, as I am focused on specific aspects of the historical record.

1 response

Yes 100%. I can't tell you how many times I have learned about the French Revolution, American Revolution, Industrial Revolutionary etc. When there are classes for ancient history they are taken up immediately because people want to learn something different. But i feel there have been less and less options over the last few years.

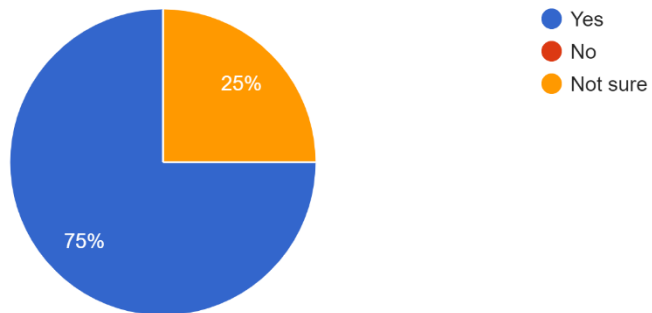
Do you believe that engagement in history classes is dropping?

8 responses



Do you believe that historical knowledge is declining?

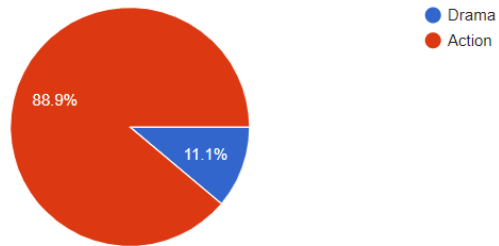
8 responses



Alexander the Great Survey

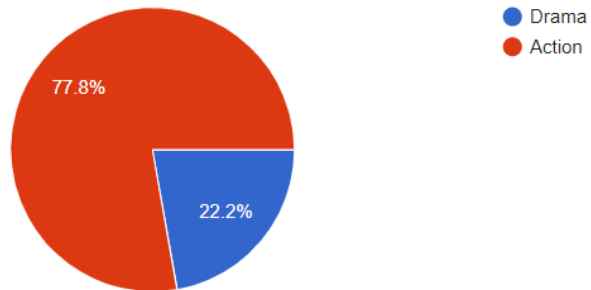
If you went to watch a movie about ancient history (Egypt, Greece, Macedonia, Rome) without knowing anything about the story beforehand, which genre would you expect it to be?

9 responses



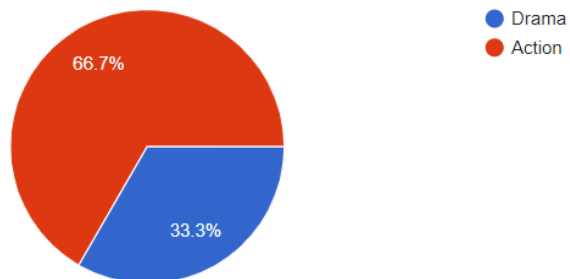
Which genre would you find more entertaining for an ancient history film?

9 responses



If you're going to see a film about Alexander the Great, which do you expect?

9 responses



History Classes in High School Survey

What history classes did you take in high school?

9 responses

apush, freshman world

US and World History (cant remember the exact years i took them)

ap us history, world history, law and justice, us history

AP World History (before they changed the curriculum) which started at early homo sapiens and hunter gatherer societies up to present, US History I which covered colonization of the americas to before the civil war, US History II (at BCC) which cover the civil war to present

American history (homeschooled + in private school)

Western Civ., American Studies, American History, AP Euro

Ap euro, ap world, gov/econ honors, us history

American History (~1600-1945), World History (~2000BCE-1750)

Eastern and Western Civics, American History, world History