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CINEMA AND THE TEACHING OF ANCIENT HISTORY: POSSIBILITIES

José Maria Gomes de Souza Neto [1]

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between cinema and Ancient History, arguing that cinema not only represented the ancient world but also played a decisive role in shaping the ways in which it came to be imagined and understood. Across its many genres and approaches, cinematic fiction has come to seem more real than reality itself. In many respects, this is how we engage with cinema. Even when we approach a "historical" film critically and remark, "it wasn't like that," its images remain before us. We know they do not correspond to the past, yet they are the images that have given it a visible form. It is precisely the friction between what we know and what we have seen that contributes to the formation of historical consciousness.

Keywords

Ancient History; History and cinema; uses of the past.

Resumo

Este artigo investiga a relação entre cinema e História Antiga, mostrando como o cinema não apenas representou o mundo antigo, mas contribuiu decisivamente para moldar a forma como ele passou a ser imaginado e compreendido. Em seus muitos gêneros e abordagens, a ficção fílmica acabou por parecer mais real que a realidade. É assim, em muitos sentidos, que lidamos com o cinema. Mesmo quando nos voltamos para um filme "histórico" com um olhar crítico e afirmamos "não foi daquele jeito", a imagem permanece diante de nós. Sabemos que ela não corresponde ao passado, mas foi ela que lhe deu uma forma visível. É justamente a fricção entre aquilo que sabemos e aquilo que vimos que participa da formação de uma consciência histórica.

Palavras-chave

História antiga; História e cinema; usos do passado.

[1] Adjunct Professor - University of Pernambuco, Nazará da Mata, Brazil. E-mail: zemariat@uol.com.br.

I initiate this text with a very clear example of how cinema impacts the historical consciousness of its audiences, and for this purpose I will use the film *Roma* (1972), directed by Federico Fellini, who was born in Rimini, a small town in the central-northern Italy. The film is composed of several episodes portraying the presence of the capital in Fellini's, and the first of them describes how he came to know the city before actually experiencing it: through cinema. As a boy during the Fascist dictatorship, his vision of the imperial past derived from the epic films he watched with his peers, in which he saw gladiators fighting for their lives, Christians martyred, and lascivious empresses bathing in milk. Rome also appeared in the classical aesthetics of Fascist films. What least resembled Antiquity, however, were the abandoned ruins in his hometown.



Figure 1: Roman ruins in Roma (1972), by Federico Fellini.

What is most interesting is that Rimini, just like all Italy, was filled with Roman remains, and as if that were not enough, the Rubicon flowed nearby. The history teacher would take his classes there, order the students to take off their shoes, and cross the stream while reading passages from Caesar's life. None of this, however, left such a strong mark on his memory of Antiquity. Somehow, fiction ended up being more real than reality. In many ways, this is how we deal with cinema. Even when we approach a "historical" film with a critical eye and say, "It wasn't like that" (and I will address this a bit further on), even if it wasn't, it is still there before our eyes; if it wasn't, it could have been. And this friction, this tension between these two sensations, have enough presence in the formation of historical consciousness (Moerbeck, 2018).

From a certain perspective, it is somewhat strange that such a modern invention, conceived throughout the nineteenth century but only fully shaped in 1896, should so often appealed to Antiquity, that is, to the most remote written temporality, to tell its stories. But all of this is related to the moment when cinema, a technique which is also an art, became established. I will address this issue shortly - for example, by discussing the diversity of these uses of Antiquity, briefly considering some theoretical elements, and then offering an attempt at explanation on how to segment this vast, more than century-long history.

Why do I call it more than a century old? The founding milestones of cinema are quite diverse, the United States has its own, but I prefer to follow the French marker, and from this perspective cinema emerged in 1896, when, in an enclosed room, a group of people watched *L'Arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (The Arrival of a Train at the La Ciotat Station). The manner in which this occurred (the luminous projection of moving images in a closed space and their shared experience) is cinema, its very birth certificate.

The following year, and by the same company run by the Lumière brothers, the first documentaries about ancient monuments were made: "*Les pyramides* (vue générale)" (The Pyramids: General View) and "*Descente de la grande pyramide*" (Descent of the Great Pyramid). The producers sent a cameraman, or cinematographer (Alexandre Promio), to Egypt, and it was not as if he had simply filmed the scenes; in fact, he organized an entire *mise-en-scène*.

For about fifty seconds, and at a moment prior to the archaeological excavations of that site, the film "displays several layers of a kind of visual archaeology, divided into three planes: in the first, a row of travelers moving across the frame; in the second, the face of the Sphinx; and in the third, the imposing Pyramid" of Mykerinos (Allan, 2008, p. 160). This row of travelers, a group of Egyptians and their dromedaries, emerges, small, from beside the monument, giving it scales, and reappears in front of the camera, followed by other Egyptians and two Westerners, all on foot. As they pass, "rocking back and forth with the camels' steps, the monuments enter and leave view, repeatedly eclipsed by bodies often out of focus" (ibid., p. 160). These scenes are quite revealing of the way the site is perceived, where these monuments stand, the Giza plateau, and how a Western power captured a foreign historical monument and considered it its own.

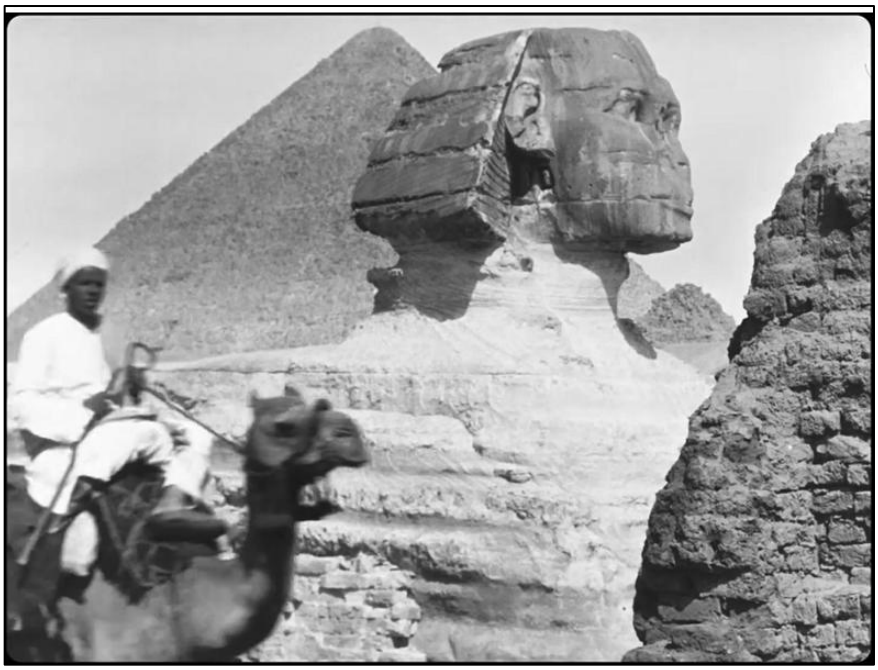


Figure 2: Scene from *Les pyramides* (vue générale) (1897), by the French cinematographer Alexandre Promio.

In the same year, we have the first fictional representation of Antiquity. Once again, the Lumière company produced brief enactments of important historical scenes, among which was *Néron essayant des poisons sur des esclaves* (Nero Testing Poisons on Slaves). The cinematographer was our already familiar Alexandre Promio; the director, George Hatot, came from the Théâtre Hippodrome in Paris and would be in charge of the most important productions that year. The backdrop was created by Marcel Jambon, an experienced set designer who had already painted scenery for the Paris Opera.

Although short, less than a minute, and relatively simple (a single shot with a static camera), the film contains important elements for understanding the representation of Rome in cinema. The attention to costume (there are the inevitable togas), the violence, and, of course, the debut of one of the worst villains in the entire history of cinema: Nero, sitting very well, surrounded by his courtiers and giving poison to his slaves to see how they died. This story is much more connected to Cleopatra than to Nero himself, but what matters is that just one year after the first cinema screening, Antiquity was already present, both in documentary and fiction. In other words, this relationship begins almost immediately. Almost immediately, the people filming reality began to seek out Antiquity.



Figure 3: Néron essayant des poisons sur des esclaves (1897).

And throughout this history, which spans from 1897 to 2025 and counting, we have already seen everything in this relationship between cinema and Antiquity, so that it is possible to present a general sample of various films in order to make this diversity clearly visible to the reader.

It is very common for the cinematic representation of Antiquity to be typically composed of grand, expensive, and very long films, which we know as epics. Indeed, these productions are the first that come to mind when we think of the cinematic portrayal of the ancient world. A handful of stories have already been filmed and refilmed tirelessly: the novels of Edward Bulwer (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1900, 1926, 1935, 1959, 2014) and Lew Wallace (*Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, 1908, 1925, 1959, 2016), biblical stories (especially the life and passion of Jesus Christ), and Shakespearean plays (particularly *Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra*).

Apart from films about Jesus, perhaps the most important epics in the history of cinema are those based on the work of the Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis*, filmed in 1901, 1911, 1913, 1924, 1951, 2001, 2024 - clearly showing that every generation had its own version. In one way or another, and given the limitations of their respective times, all these films celebrated a grandeur that became essentially the ideal translation of the ancient world. But as important as this format is for the cinematic representation of Antiquity, it should not be assumed to be the only possible genre for such treatment. The ancient world has been portrayed in a wide variety of ways and for the most diverse purposes.

As much as it may seem otherwise, the epic is not synonymous with Antiquity… it is, to a large extent, a style that emphasizes action and emotion (which often, but not always, implies superficiality) and requires a great deal of money to produce. Many filmmakers and filmographies either wish to avoid this model or simply lack the resources to depict the ancient world in this way, and therefore develop other cinematic languages.

The approach chosen by directors Paul Humfress and Derek Jarman in filming *Sebastiane* (1976) was not epic, a film set in Late Antiquity, entirely spoken in Latin, and presenting the life of Saint Sebastian, considered a patron by homosexuals. The film is an ode to homoaffective aesthetics, full of scenes of homoeroticism and much nudity, at a time of affirmation of what was then called the gay community. Jarman, an openly homosexual director who saw cinema as militant art, turned to Antiquity not to display sumptuous buildings, but rather to, in a way, show that in Ancient History there already existed a love that dared not speak its name.

Because of the habit of seeing the epic as the essential form of representing Antiquity (and since most of the most famous titles were and are American), one might consider that this use of the past is restricted to Western countries and their interests. It is true that they play a very important role in this field, but research can reveal surprises. There are, for example, critical approaches that we would today call decolonial, such as the film by the Egyptian director Youssef Chahine, *Alexandria Again and Forever* (literally, Alexandria Again and Again; there is no Portuguese title), from 1990.

In the context of a major strike by cinema professionals, Chahine, an Alexandrian whose narrative is frequently non-linear (if not openly surrealist), began to reflect on his career as a director, the city in which he lives, and its past. He extracts Alexander from the classical world and places him as part of his own history - in fact, a significant portion of the film investigates this figure and his memory, to the point that Chahine positions himself as the discoverer of his lost tomb. The whiteness of the classical statues becomes a motif for jokes, from slapstick to cartoons. And Alexander is no longer an untouchable Westerner, but rather an Egyptian character who, idolized in the streets, blows a bubble with chewing gum until it bursts.



Figure 4: *Alexandria, Again and Forever* (1990).

Strange times produce strange Antiquities. It is very common for American critics to link the 1999 film *The Mummy* to the homonymous horror of the 1930s, but this demonstrates how little these specialized writers actually know about the art they set out to analyze. The idea of a mummified corpse returning to life to find its beloved is, indeed, the starting point for the early-century film, but not only for it. In the dying days of the dictatorships that plagued their respective countries for decades, the Spanish director Carlos Aured and the Brazilian Ivan Cardoso made two remarkably similar films: the Spanish *fantaterror* (Martinez-Camacho, 2023) *La venganza de la momia* (1975) and the Brazilian *terrir* (Lyra, 2006). *O Segredo da Múmia* (1982), two low-budget productions that, at first glance, would seem to have little to do with the Hollywood multimillion-dollar production, but which surprisingly share a significant part of its plot, and with each other the fact that they resort to violence and sex (two elements that, moreover, are not exactly absent in *The Mummy*).

It is clear that the representation of Antiquity is not limited to epic films, but even within this genre there are diverse forms of expression. For example, it is often assumed that its creation was indelibly linked to male artists, yet one of the earliest epics was directed by a woman, the French filmmaker Alice Guy. Speaking of her is to refer to one of the protagonists in the birth of cinema, one of the first (perhaps the very first) people to direct a film—not merely capturing images, but writing a script and considering the best way to translate it to the screen. Her career is well summarized by the Who's Who of Victorian Cinema, edited by Stephen Herbert and Luke McKernan (1996, p. 61).

> The world's first female director has perhaps been somewhat excessively romanticized, yet even so, and by any standard, she had an extraordinary career. (…) She became the secretary of Félix Richard, a producer of photographic materials, and when Léon Gaumont bought the business in 1895, she joined Gaumont (…) In 1897, Gaumont was diversifying, from the production and sale of projectors to film production. This meant producing films, and Léon Gaumont turned to his enterprising secretary, who became (…) chief producer at Gaumont between 1897 and 1906, with a production (…) of hundreds of films."

Her *La Vie et la Passion de Jésus-Christ* (1906) is a fascinating film, which, although following the model of the sacred story of Jesus (and at the turn of the century there were many of them), introduces an interesting twist: female protagonism. Not only behind the camera, but also in front of it: unlike other productions, here women are not static, passive, or objects subject to the distinctly male gaze, but rather positive agents within the scene. Female angels watch over the sleeping infant Jesus while Mary works alongside Joseph; if Christ is scourged and mistreated by men (one of them strikes him in the face during the encounter with Caiaphas), it is the women who take care of him. During the first fall on the Via Crucis, while the men watch indifferently, the women help him, comfort him, kneel alongside him, and are aggressively pushed aside by soldiers. The opening shot of the crucifixion focuses on them, as Christ is nailed to the cross in the background, and when it is finally raised, they are moved while the men celebrate. During the agony of the crucified, they embrace each other at the foot of the cross, and when the body is taken down, they receive it and carefully wrap it in the shroud provided by Joseph of Arimathea. Finally, after the resurrection, they go to the tomb and find it open—not one or two (as mentioned in the Gospels), but many, between eight and nine, far more than the Bible recounts, with no men accompanying them. Inside the cave, joyful female angels appear, and together they all celebrate the resurrection.

Cinema that represents Antiquity has never been isolated from the issues of the world that produced it. One aspect that made these films so appealing to audiences was precisely their ability to depict past eras convincingly, based (as usual) on information provided by archaeology and the most current historiography, sciences that guided the construction of sets, the development of narratives, and, undoubtedly, contributed, in the words of Maria Wyke, to the formation of historical consciousness, "sometimes operating in conjunction with, and occasionally in opposition to, more direct access to extant monuments and literary texts, to resurrect a vivid past intimately connected with contemporary interests" (1997, p. 3). It is not, therefore, a question of determining whether one temporality

takes precedence over another, but rather of how one historical moment relates to another that it considers important to its formation, and recreates it in such a way that, "thanks to our mental laziness" (Carrière, 2006, p. 117), the older the film, the more supposedly similar to the past it portrays it seems to be.

An example of how this relationship between distinct historical times occurs took place between the 1930s and 1940s. Fascist Italy produced several propaganda films, aiming, among other things, to divert the domestic audience from Hollywood productions, and one of the highest-budget investments was the epic *Scipio Africanus* (1937), directed by Carmine Gallone. At the moment when the country was launching a campaign to invade Ethiopia, it revived the Roman imperial myth, the fight against the Carthaginians on African soil, whose climax was the confrontation between the Roman legions and Hannibal's elephants. Mussolini provided soldiers to participate in this sequence, and dozens of elephants and horses were brought in to form the clashing armies.

Now, what happens when fascist propaganda becomes anticolonial propaganda? As incredible as it may seem, this did occur. *Scipio Africanus* traveled to several countries, including British India, where its screening in cinemas had a profound impact on the first major Indian film director, Sohrab Modi. He recognized the power of cinema to narrate History, especially at a moment when British imperial pressure was intensifying due to World War II and the Indian independence movement. Instead of addressing the present, Modi turned to the past, focusing on Alexander's invasion of India, and filmed *Sikandar* (1941). The scene depicting the clash between armies had particularly impressed him, but how could he recreate it in such a constrained context? Modi adapted certain aspects: if in the Italian film Scipio addresses the legions confronting the empire and white supremacy, in the Indian film it is King Porus who delivers an ode to anticolonial freedom:

> Your country is the one where many of its sons have died, yet they never let the flag touch the ground. Today, a foreigner, thirsty for power, tells you to lower this flag of pride and wishes to destroy you. If you wish to maintain your own pride and that of your descendants, of your ancestors, march with all the strength present in your bodies and souls. (Souza Neto, 2024, p. 424).

Others, however, were simply impossible to refilm at that time: the sequence of the great confrontation with soldiers, horses, and elephants representing Carthage's defeat by Rome, for example. In this case, Modi simply appropriated reels from the Italian film and incorporated the scenes into his own production.

Even the defeat of the non-European army took on a new meaning in *Sikandar*: if in the Italian film the African "barbarians" are crushed, in the Indian film, despite Alexander's victory, he withdraws from India. It is no coincidence that this production was banned and persecuted by the British - it was not difficult to see that the Macedonian conqueror was, in fact, a symbol of British domination.

All the examples we have pointed out (and there would be many others) show how the History professional specialized in Antiquity has at their disposal an immense world of cinematic approaches to use in the classroom. We will now turn to which stories can be told with the help of films.

The cinematic universe dealing with Antiquity is immense; therefore, it is essential to establish delineations and classifications. The first delineation is thematic: Mediterranean Antiquity, which is closer to our reality and consistently appears in the National Common Curricular Base. Any film, from any cinematography, that addresses this theme can be used. Other ancient worlds are depicted in other cinematographies: India has a tradition dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century (of which Sikandar is a good example), and the same applies to China and, to some extent, Japan, but the presence of these temporalities in the school curriculum is limited; hence, preference is given to the expanded Mediterranean ancient world. The more varied the cinematographies, the richer our understanding of the cinematic representation of Antiquity and the diverse languages used to achieve it.

I open a parenthesis in my approach to cinema of Antiquity to bring into the discussion a film that deals with contemporary times: *Entre les murs* (The Class), by Laurent Cantet (2008), whose action takes place in a school. In physical terms, it is exactly what we, as teachers, would dream of having in our work: new desks, freshly painted, airy classrooms with large windows and relatively few students per class. But the problem does not lie in these aspects, but rather in how François Marin, a French teacher and the main character, conducts his subject. Located in a Parisian suburb, his class is absolutely diverse, with some "proper French" students (that is, white and children of French parents), descendants of Arabs, Black students of African and Caribbean origin, Chinese—diversity to which

Marin is technically blind. When he intends to teach a tense of the subjunctive, which to us sounds more common than in French, the students frankly ask: "Why do I have to learn this? I'm not going to tell my mother 'if I were,' it makes no sense." The situation presented establishes a valid problem also for those working with Ancient History: why teach it? The answer could be: how to teach it in a way that makes sense to the students? Whether they are in Bagé, Petrolina, Manaus, or São Paulo, it will always be necessary for the teacher to know how to adapt the lesson. As can be seen, in this approach the film is not mere illustration—it could even be used as such, of course, but its potential is much greater: it can establish a problem, or in the words of the philosopher Julio Cabrera (2006), be a "problem-instantiating language."

Among the set of theoretical references I have used to work with films over the past ten years, Cabrera is usually my starting point. He proposed two tools that I always employ: the first is *logopathic understanding*, a comprehension that can only be achieved through logos, reason, and *pathos*, feeling. In this sense, cinema touches on a very specific nerve, which also occurs in literature, but since it is an art that engages multiple senses (visual, auditory) and various forms of expression (verbal, non-verbal, mnemonic, etc.), perhaps cinema does it in a way that no other medium can. History learned through films is like Fellini's Rome: a (non-) lesson that teaches in a way that endures in memory and the subconscious. Even when there are, let us say, factual errors, rather than simply pointing them out (the traditional impertinent role of the historian), it is worth asking: did you notice this error? What did it mean to you? What did it tell you? This practice establishes bonds between the students and the film being shown.

The second tool is the concept-image. A film does not rely exclusively on written or spoken text; it expresses itself through an entire set of articulated languages, of which the visual is the most important, but which is actually composed of a whole weave of information (dialogues, soundtrack, sound effects, visual effects, written texts, and so on). In other words, instead of the concept we are most familiar with, articulated verbally, the concept-image reaches us through multiple channels, multiple inputs. There are concept-images of all kinds (Cabrera asserts that the film as a whole is a mega concept-image), so a teacher can confidently show a segment of a film to their class, as long as they are aware of and know how to work with the concept-image expressed in the part they have chosen.



Figure 5: *Le Monstre* (1903).

Let us take as an example for analysis the short film *Le Monstre*, by Georges Méliès. In just a few minutes, and without any dialogue, it manages to convey the entire orientalist ideology (Said, 1995) about Egypt cultivated in the West: ancient monuments, eroticism, magic, and danger are all present. Those who watch this film construct a particular image of ancient Egypt; rather than simply combating this mistaken vision, it is the teacher's role to work with it, building knowledge from the narrative presented.

We do not refer to orientalism by chance: the Guinean researcher Mariana Queen Nwabasili (2022) draws attention to the fact that only a decade separates the invention of cinema from the Berlin Conference, which divided Africa. In other words, is it wrong to say that cinema is an industrial art shaped and influenced by this context? Absolutely not. In many aspects, it is the continuation of a nineteenth-century art - imperialist, racist, sexist, and so on. Thus, when we watch a film (especially those aimed at a mass audience), we see a modern guise - whether that "modern" is from the 1920s, 1960s, 2010s, or 2020s - applied to a set of ideas that is much older, characterized by linear narratives, villains, and heroes. And it is not uncommon for non-white characters to be preferred as villains, in Antiquity or in other historical periods.

Can these concept-images cross decades, even centuries? There is reason to believe so: in 2023, director Ridley Scott released the film *Napoleon*, and one of its sequences took place in Egypt. Upon its release, there was some controversy, especially among Egyptologists, because the film depicts the general bombarding the pyramids. Several colleagues pointed out the

absurdity, since Napoleon had actually brought specialists to analyze the monuments and conduct research. But it is necessary to move beyond the mere bombardment to understand the concept-image of these scenes: before the French general with his cannons aligned, stood the defending Egyptian troops brandishing their weapons—brown and Black people wielding scimitars. This is an entirely orientalist vision, which establishes the idea that Islam had stopped in time. Muslims knew of and produced gunpowder long before Europeans, so they would never have faced a well-known enemy army with swords. And on top of that, scimitars—weapons they did not even use. Napoleon fired his shots at the pyramids in order not to hit the enemy soldiers, who, upon hearing the blasts, fall to the ground defeated. Observe how the idea that Napoleon bombarded the pyramids caused outrage, but the fact that he did so to frighten what he called "defenseless people" did not. Seeing Black and brown people incapable of defending their heritage from foreign, white invaders seemed normal, and this is an excellent starting point for classroom discussion.

Another extremely important reference for our analysis of the cinema-history relationship is the American scholar Robert Rosenstone. In his book *History on Film*, *Film on History* (2010), he goes so far as to equate the historian with the filmmaker (thanks to the way both research facts and organize them into a coherent narrative), an idea developed from the notions of his compatriot Hayden White. Although we do not fully agree with this proposition, there is one element that we consider essential to working with cinema:

> (...) the film allows itself to invent facts (...) to elaborate traces of the past' (...) 'the rich visual images and metaphors it provides help us to think historically' (...) the goal is not to provide literal truths about the past (as if our written history could do so), but metaphorical truths that function, to a large extent, as a kind of commentary, and challenge, in relation to traditional historical discourse'. (2010, p. 24)

The binary of truth/fiction (or more precisely, truth/lie) is deeply rooted in historiographical practice, and this explains, in part, why historiography took so long to accept films as historical sources. Yet the contribution Rosenstone presents is not negligible. We, as History professionals, are ethically bound to what the sources indicate, but the commitments of a film are different (aesthetic, financial), and this freedom allows for the expansion of our historical thinking. Let us use an example: a recent film called *The Book of Clarence*.



Figure 6: *The Book of Clarence* (2023)

In the context of a society that continues to debate whether Queen Cleopatra was white or Black (something historically unanswerable, and which exists only within the realm of historical fictionalization), the young British director, producer, musician, and composer Jeymes Samuel presents a significantly bolder (and more relevant) idea: what if everyone in Judea were Black, and the whites were the Roman oppressors? Escaping the "limits imposed by seriousness" (Alberti, 1999), which even circumscribe historiographical practice, Samuel challenges the entire Western tradition of representing Christ and raises essential questions: Jesus could not have been Black (nothing in the sources indicates he was), but he was also not the extremely fair-haired, long-haired figure propagated by Western imagery - and the problem is that only one of these representations, the first, sparks controversy. The entire film is reverent (the figure of Mary is particularly powerful), but it is Samuel's audacity in addressing the racial question that expands our capacity to think about the presence of Antiquity and the mental and dialogical exercises we perform to reach it—in one word, its strength lies in the allegory it invokes.

Another extremely powerful metaphorical exercise was created by the American producer, director, animator, and screenwriter Nina Paley in the animation *Seder Masochism*[2] (2018), or the "masochism of the Jewish Passover Seder." Jewish herself, Paley turned to the religious traditions of her culture (the Seder celebrates the Exodus from Egypt), highlighting the violence of the moment and how it is celebrated; from there, she develops a thesis on human history: when mother-goddesses pontificated, the world was significantly less violent; it was the presence of the male-god, that is, patriarchy, that brought about the massive increase in violence, and the

[2] Film available on YouTube with Portuguese subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7Yk59fZZ0I&t=489s. Accessed on 07/31/2025.

first victims of this new state of affairs were precisely women: the religious power they had enjoyed was taken away, their bodies covered and constrained, while men (with their penises that became weapons, that became tools, that draw lines, that create property, and so on) assumed power. The argument she develops is extremely rich, and the way she explains the conflict(s) in the Middle East (and the consequent triumph of death) is disturbing.

Notice that multiple theoretical tools can be applied to a single film. *Seder Masochism* can be understood according to Rosenstone's metaphorization proposal, but it is equally plausible to interpret it as a mega concept-image (the direct connection between violence and the rise of patriarchy) composed of infra-concept-images:



Figure 7: *Seder Masochism* (2018)

The image above illustrates what I mean: if we consider *Seder Masochism* as a mega concept-image, one of its infra-concept-images is expressed in this screenshot, where monsters representing the three monotheistic religions threaten the primordial mother-goddess, who ultimately ends up being devoured.

The critical analysis of films does not concern only the period in which they were produced (as argued by Marc Ferro) but also the tradition in which the technique itself is embedded. Cultural studies scholar Elle Shohat (2006) situates the emergence of cinema at the height of European imperialism, technological inventions, the telegraph, the train, and industrial chemistry, and proposes that this new art/technique assumed, from the very beginning, a role in popularizing modern knowledge, acting as a transversal means of disseminating scientific knowledge. This applied both to biology and, above all, to history. Important directors, starting with

the American D. W. Griffith, argued that the new way of narrating history was through films, no longer through books, and that the libraries of the future would have, instead of shelves, projection cubicles. Cinema incorporated the most recent archaeological discoveries - there were even filming teams documenting excavations, and in their newsreels (early twentieth-century news films) and documentaries, these were shown to the public; subsequently, these discoveries informed producers, who created plausible architectural reconstructions in their fiction films, generating the illusion that the past was being portrayed faithfully.

Let us take *The Loves of Pharaoh*, a 1922 German production, as an example. Since the beginning of the century, important German archaeologists argued that the Egyptians were White - Abeer M. Kamel (2023, p. 23) quotes Georg Steindorff and Heinrich Schäfer, who defended the "Nordic nature" and "features" of the Egyptians, and Walther Wolf, for whom Egyptian art was proof of the Aryan origin of that people. In this context, *The Loves of Pharaoh* presents three main groups of characters: the Greek slave, white, an ideal of beauty; the Egyptians, formal and organized, and if not entirely white, with much lighter skin; and finally, the Ethiopians, portrayed by actors in blackface and presented in a crude, caricatured manner (the Ethiopian king ridiculously stretches his lower lip, bites his nails, and deliberately ignores the courtly ceremonial).This is how cinema claims to present the reality discovered by archaeology and history (a contemporary critic even suggested that teachers should take their classes to watch *The Loves of Pharaoh*), but beyond pointing out the errors and inaccuracies, it is essential to ask: why is it presented this way? What is its production context? What is the relationship between what is shown in the film and what we know from historiography about this region or period? From these questions, we create problems that allow us to think historically about the world.

As we have already seen, the relationship between cinema and Ancient History is more than a century old; this implies the existence of a body of productions that is virtually impossible to address in its entirety. Anyone attempting to do so would invariably be caught in a Tantalus-like trap. It is therefore necessary to establish criteria and classifications for selecting films, with the aim of maximizing the diversity of themes, origins, styles, and languages of the works we intend to use.

The most common segmentation (used even by various authors dedicated to film history, see Konigsberg, 2004; Vela, 2019) is chronological, but in a recent article (Souza Neto, 2023) I proposed another division, based on horizons. My concern was: how to construct a cinematic history of Rome, for example, encompassing examples from silent cinema to the 21st

century, identifying trends, changes, and the use of diverse resources? A horizon is something that disappears from view, whose end seems indeterminate, and it was precisely this indeterminacy that I sought in my model, since many works simply overlap in their themes. *Cleopatra* is a film about the Roman Empire? Undoubtedly, but it is also a vision of Egypt. *Alexander* (2004) depicts Hellenic expansion and Persia, yet its scenes in Babylon are among the best ever produced in cinema. In the cited article, I proposed three horizons: biblical, classical, and Egyptian. Each aimed to identify easily recognizable elements in the productions that linked them to a specific group, but not exclusively—the horizons intersect with one another. However, direct contact with film sources and reading *Reception of Mesopotamia on Film* (2022) by Maria de Fátima Rosa revealed the need for a fourth horizon, the "Oriental" (as such, in quotes), visually associated with Mesopotamia (notably Assyria), but which could be used to represent any Mediterranean culture that was not classical, Jewish, or Egyptian—i.e., considered "Oriental." The Carthage of early 20th-century Italian films, such as *Cabiria* (1914), the Sodom of Sodom and *Gomorrah* (1922), or, impressively, Rhodes in *The Colossus of Rhodes* (1961)—not coincidentally the Greek island located furthest east. Using the horizon approach, it is possible to ensure that representations of temporalities are studied not merely according to a chronological framework but thematically. According to this proposal, an analysis of cinema about Rome allows for grand Western epics (*Quo Vadis or Ben-Hur*), slapstick comedies (*The Three Ages*, 1923, with Buster Keaton), a Japanese comedy with surrealist touches (*Thermae Romae*, 2012), experimental films (*Fellini's Satyricon*, 1969), and so on, guaranteeing the diversity of approaches and enabling transversal studies.

A fundamental division within cinema itself occurs between documentaries and fiction. The former are very close to our own work (many documentary filmmakers even have training in History or related disciplines), and it is not surprising that they were the first films accepted for classroom use. Although they claim to depict exactly what the camera lens captures, we must not forget that they are narratives like any other, and as such, they need to be subjected to critical scrutiny.

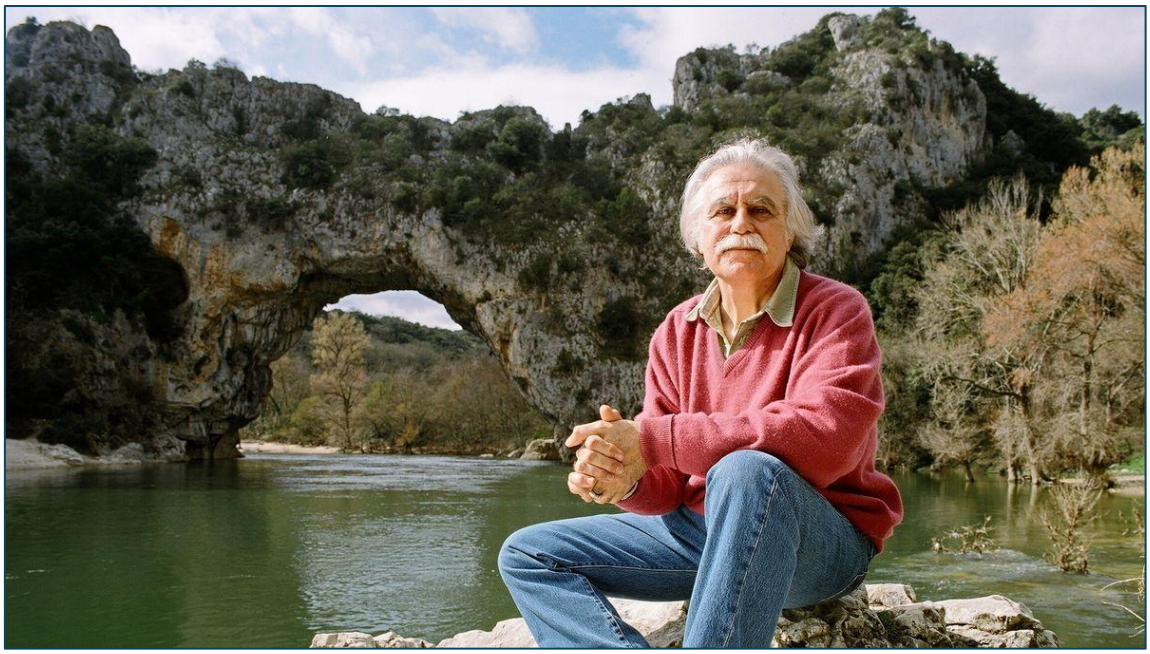


Figure 8: *A Caverna dos Sonhos Esquecidos* (2010)

To reflect on this, let us consider an excellent documentary: *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), devoted to the Chauvet Cave in France, unknown until the 1990s when it was discovered by chance. For over an hour, we are taken to explore the magnificent paintings it contains, the efforts made for their preservation, and the technological sophistication required. But near the end, filmmaker Werner Herzog poses a question to the project director, Jean-Michel Geneste: "Do you think the Chauvet cave paintings were, in some way, the beginning of the modern human soul?" The scientist responds with a beautiful and philosophical monologue, and his answer is significant: if communication and the recording of memory are hallmarks of humanity, "this is an invention of the Cro-Magnon (...) and it continues identically in our world today" - citing as an example the very camera recording him.

We have the voice of authority, a renowned scientist, repeating a discourse that would not sound entirely out of place coming from a white European man of the 19th century: history was born in Europe. In other words, no matter how objective they claim to be, documentaries are, in fact, discourses—and just like fiction, they must be approached with appropriate theoretical tools (some of which we have presented in this text) and, above all, must generate problems in order to effectively contribute to historical knowledge.

One can say that there is no such thing as a film that is more or less faithful to the historical period it depicts; rather, all the arguments presented need to be carefully analyzed so that the productions serve the purposes

intended by history professionals -whether in classes, research, articles, lectures, courses, outreach, and so on.

Regarding the epics of the Mediterranean Antiquity, a handful of countries managed to produce them over the course of this century and a bit: the United States, Italy, Great Britain, France, and a few others from Central-Eastern Europe. They are generally easier to find, and their language is more accessible to our students; therefore, they should not be dismissed as a source, but one must also avoid the trap of working exclusively with them when so many other options are available.

There is a set of productions which, for lack of a better term, I call "non-epics"; either due to a lack of resources, aesthetic choices, or both, they oppose the epic model and approach Antiquity from a different perspective. Europe produced many of these, but also some Latin American countries (including Brazil) and African countries (notably Egypt). A good example is a film available on YouTube, *The Eloquent Peasant* [3], directed by the Egyptian Chadi Abdel Sayam. It is interesting to compare it with another production set in the same location: *Cleopatra* (1963), for instance. *The Tale…* is a twenty-minute short film, while the other is an epic lasting almost three hours; one had very limited resources, the other cost over 31 million dollars; one presents Ancient Egypt based on a locally produced philosophical work, while the other is an adaptation of Shakespeare, which in turn drew inspiration from Plutarch. One expresses the attempt to establish a national cinema, while the other was born to conquer the entire world. Such contrasts make the use of films an extremely rich analytical tool.

Films provoke cinematic reactions, and it is particularly interesting when these reactions can be explored. From the 1970s until the late 1990s, large-scale epics went out of fashion, but in the early 2000s they returned with some strength, adapted to the audiences of that moment. *Gladiator* (2000) had once again accustomed viewers to watching violent spectacles in the arenas, and in this context, director Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) – never before had Jesus' body been so cruelly mistreated on screen. Reactions to the film were diverse, but perhaps the most interesting came from Iran: Jesus is considered an Islamic prophet, 'Isa, and the Iranians did not react well to the violent spectacle they witnessed. In this context, director Nader Talebzadeh produced another film, *The Messiah* (2007), much more respectful of the sacred figure, and with two

[3] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76HgCjDoqvg. Accessed on 08/04/2025.

consecutive endings, one Christian (Christ dies on the cross) and one Muslim (he is taken up, a double remains in his place and is crucified).

And what about contemporary cinema on Antiquity? As always, epics attract the most attention, whether with *Gladiator II* (2015), adaptations of Homer's works, or the two Cleopatras promised by 2030. But once again, it is important not to fall into this appealing trap. Despite the many traditional (or conventional) "Jesus films" being released, the already mentioned *The Book of Clarence* offers a richer environment of possibilities. Within Hollywood itself, a director like Darren Aronofsky has created contestatory epics, such as *Noah* (2014) and *Mother!* (2017). In the Brazilian *Antígona 442 B.C.* (2021), actress Andréa Beltrão plays all the roles of Sophocles' tragedy, set in an immediate post-pandemic environment and during Bolsonaro's government, addressing plague and tyranny.

But perhaps the most intriguing recent release is *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (2024), by the experimental director Zeb Haradon, available on YouTube[4]. Entirely produced using artificial intelligence, it starts from an interesting premise: the Sumerians supposedly invented cinema millennia ago, a technology passed down to other Mesopotamian peoples who succeeded them. As the most important literary work for all was the Epic, each era would have produced its own versions, using the cinematic resources available and applying the metaphors they deemed appropriate. In reference to the very book we have today, Haradon's film is also composed of fragments found in various languages and from diverse origins, and its reconstruction demonstrates its composite nature. Haradon employed multiple filming styles reminiscent of early cinema, from German Expressionism to the trick films common at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century; it is as if we are watching the history of cinema being retold through the supposedly Sumerian fragments that made up Gilgamesh.

But how can these and other films be used in the classroom? Ferreira (2018) proposes an interesting methodology divided into five stages: *contextualization of the theme, contextualization of the production, financial production, its reception, and the analysis of the filmic narrative itself*. The topics discussed in this text refer mostly to the last item, but it is essential that, when choosing a given production to present to students, the teacher be aware of these other aspects, so that they can establish the relationships between the historical period depicted, the temporalities shown on screen, and the historical moment of the work's production.

[4] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDO6M9_G0EA. Accessed on 08/04/2025.

And so I conclude this text, reaffirming the importance of researching films from different origins and periods, encompassing various historical themes, so that work with students can be enriched.

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