

romantic excursion, though often the jaunt leads to more heartbreak than joy. Further proof that genres change to meet the demands of the viewing public, a twenty-first century viewing public vying for a more truthful representation of “travelogue romance,” a truth that Robert R. Shandley aptly provides in this seminal work, a must read for film enthusiast, historians, and researchers.

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Largely Absent

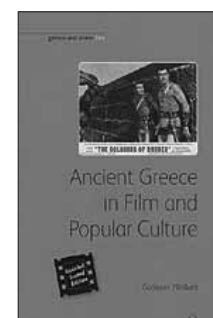
Gideon Nisbet's book—a survey of selected mass-market films set in Ancient Greece—focuses on pictures made over the last fifty years for English speaking audiences, explaining why photodramas about the Greeks are largely absent from the American and British cinema. According to Nisbet, “One obvious reason for the relative scarcity of Hollywood films set in Ancient Greece is the difficulty of selling Greece to cinema audiences because audiences assume Greece is boring” (p. 7).

Yet Nisbet also notes that Hollywood itself is partly responsible for this perception. In contrast to the bland treatment accorded to the Greeks, Roman-themed movies are often lavish productions, typically employing spectacular sets and casts of thousands: *Ben Hur* (1959), *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Gladiator* (2000), etc. Indeed, not only does the film industry favor Rome at the expense of Greece, but it even presents Achaean stories as Roman ones.

Accordingly, many Hollywood films tend to reinforce stereotypical notions of antiquity and to say more about the contemporary audiences for whom they were produced, than about the ancient cultures they are purported to portray. Nisbet exemplifies this claim by comparing the depiction of Athens in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989) with that of Rome in *The Robe* (1953). In *Bill and Ted*, ancient Athens is confined to intimate views of old, bearded men in white robes sitting about discussing philosophy. In contrast, in *The Robe*, sweeping, wide-angled shots are used to emphasize the spectacle and majesty of ancient Rome. The portrayal of ‘So-Crates’ in *Bill and Ted*, itself a parody, highlights the popular perception of the Greeks as intellectual and boring. In contrast with Rome and its public blood sports and chariot races, brainy Greece is not good box office.

Nisbet notes that Hollywood tried to overcome this difficulty by turning to heroic figures drawn from Greek mythology as film subjects, thereby hoping to make Hellenic culture more exciting and ‘Roman’. This led to a virtual cottage industry of films about Hercules that included children's cartoons and a popular TV series that is still in syndication (note: Hollywood uses the Roman, not the Greek (*Herakles*) form of the name). The popularity of Steve Reeves' *Hercules* films during the late 1950's spawned a series of screenplays based on Hercules-like heroes: *Atlas* (1960) and *The Colossus of Rhodes* (1961)) and even a reworking of Homer—*Helen of Troy* (1956)). Yet, even here, the success of the ‘Hercules’ brand did not carry over to other Greek themed movies which tended to be box office flops, resulting in their respective director's decision (Roger Corman, Sergio Leone, and Robert Wise) to swear off movies about ‘men in skirts’ altogether.

The main problem with these films was that many of the background visuals and themes on display were actually Roman (amphitheaters, costumes, tyrannical rulers, slave revolts, etc). This presentation of Greek stories as Roman ones affected the audience's ability to appreciate the cultural uniqueness of Greece. Why does Hollywood insist on portraying Greek stories as Roman? Because Hollywood, “taps into and reinforces popular ideas about the ancient world” (p. xiv). In an attempt to make Greece seem more exciting to cinema audiences, it was portrayed as Roman,



Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture

Gideon Nisbet.
Bristol Phoenix Press, 2008.
208 pages; \$24.95.

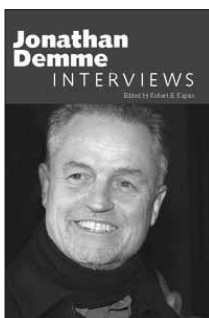
resulting in the audience's inability to appreciate the Hellenic uniqueness. Greece is always overshadowed by Rome, and is often regarded as a bad imitation of it. The situation has not improved in recent years with *Troy* (2004) and *Alexander* (2004), two commercial and critical disappointments. Despite the popularity of the controversial screen adaptation of Frank Miller's *300* (2006), it is unclear whether Hollywood will follow this up with more ancient epics.

Nisbet's main argument about why Greek-themed topics do not do well, however, could be characterized as tautological. That is, movies about Greece are not commercially successful because of the merry-go-round effect: audiences perceive Greece to be boring because Hollywood films—reinforcing the stereotypes audiences have about Greece—portray Greece as boring. Despite this small problem, the book makes many interesting points and contributions. Mr. Nisbet clearly has a lot of genuine enthusiasm for the ancient world and enjoys both highbrow and mass-market depictions of antiquity not only in historic films, but also within the genre of science fiction movies, television shows, and graphic novels. The author's refusal to exclude popular culture from his study allows his work to act as a bridge between the intellectual elitism of the academy and the sheer pleasure offered by mass-market entertainment.

The book is designed for classroom use and is appropriate not only for classical civilization courses but also film, history, and media studies. As a further aid, the text has specialized terms highlighted in bold face the first time they appear in the text. Students can then refer to the glossary where such terminology is given in alphabetical order. The book also includes a basic annotated bibliography of selected film studies and web pages.

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Jonathan Demme: Interviews.

Robert E. Kapsis, Editor.
University Press of Mississippi, 2009.
184 pages; \$50.00.

It's My Job

In a spirited 1984 interview, Michael Sragow—of the American Film Institute—asked Jonathan Demme about the dynamic character development in his early films and the noted director responded, “If I get turned on by a script, it’s my job to make the viewers of the movie feel the way I felt as a reader of the script.” (21) Two of Demme’s early films were *Citizens Band* (aka *Handle with Care*, 1977) a clever view of CB (citizens band) radio aficionados who created alter egos over the airwaves, and *Melvin and Howard*, portraying the alleged encounter between a gas station attendant and the obsessively reclusive Howard Hughes.

This collection of Demme interviews, from the 1970s until the release of *Rachel is Getting Married* (2008), compiled by Robert E. Kapsis, professor of sociology at Queens College City University of New York, provides an insightful profile of Demme’s development of his *oeuvre*. The anecdotes are rich and numerous in Demme’s interview responses over the years. For example, he revealed that making *Swing Shift* (1984) turned into a disaster that dogged him for years.

Demme sustained his penchant for character development despite this bad experience by developing a young female character in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Clarice Starling (Jodi Foster), surrounded by older intimidating men: her manipulative boss Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn); eerily menacing serial killer Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins); and, sociopathic James “Buffalo Bill” Gumb (Ted Levine). Demme admitted that he did not discuss his reading of *Starling* with author Tom Harris. Demme considered his film “vaguely subversive,” yet not “of special interest to moviegoers, but I love that he’s taking some really good pokes at patriarchy while spinning this tale.” (61)