

Which T.V. Show or Movie Does This World Most Resemble?

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, MAY 19 2017

When I was writing my screen play, I did a lot of research on movies and television shows. The topic of the screen play was a much-maligned ancient Middle Eastern Queen, who I presented as, basically, an Arab woman. Given her reputation at the hands of her late-in-life enemy, the Romans, her being an Arab woman inherently casts doubt upon the narrative (or, we might say, propaganda) machines that surrounded her in her international context. So, how does Donald Trump resemble my screen play heroine, Cleopatra? He does not. Nonetheless, I do think there is some resemblance between the current political climate globally – and in the United States – and parts of the somewhat ancient world that Cleopatra inhabited. So, I came up with an idea for a new game show: *Which T.V. Show or Movie Does This World Most Resemble?* By *this world*, of course, I mean the general political climate around our era; I do not mean, “this worldly,” although that may apply as well. Far be it from me to interpose on such topics.

Since I do not have the ear of Hollywood, I thought I would write about it in this blog. To this end, I came up with a short-list of television serials and movies as candidates for my new game show. As any good comparative political scientist would, I will give you my short-list, and I will give you my answer up front. Then I will give you my rationale, and you can agree to disagree as you like. Who knows? You may even agree.

Short-listed by me are: (1) *Rome*; (2) *Attila*; and (3) *Mongol*. I do not include *Game of Thrones* in my short-list; but, fear not. I will address it as a potential counter-argument. *Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands* and *Vikings* come closer to my short-list in topic, feeling, and in general environment; however, they are a bit *too* ancient and so are excluded from the analysis for reasons of periodization. Both *Beowulf* and *Vikings* are meant to come from eras after Cleopatra, but the stories themselves include magical and mythological elements, magical creatures, and the like, placing them, for me, decidedly in the period before her life. *Mongol* is, in fact, more recent; but that makes it more safely old with a small “o” or possibly ancient with a small “a,” and so it works within the selection of short-listed cases for my purposes.

I promised you my answer up front, so here it is: *Rome*. My answer is, of course, perhaps predicated from the start – biased, you might say – by the fact that it is the only serial or movie in my list that takes place during the period of Cleopatra. So, it is, of course, the most apt to resemble her time period. It also, unfortunately, from my perspective, shares some striking resemblances to our time period; and, so it is the best candidate in terms of answering both sides of the question that I posed: Which television serial or movie most closely resembles both our time period and the time period of Cleopatra?

Why not *Game of Thrones*, you ask? I answer: It is too self-consciously trying to emulate our time period as a fear-based cautionary tale about what could happen if the current political establishment is dispossessed of its power. It also appears to draw upon imagery from something closer to Mesopotamia, or possibly antediluvian Sumer, based upon its architecture, and so, like *Beowulf* and *Vikings*, it is a little too ancient for the context to which I wish to compare our time.

Good. Now that the counter-argument is taken care of, we can move to my short-listed cases. Let us begin with

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Attila. *Attila* takes place in the late-Roman period. It is a beautiful film that shows a home-grown leader who rules his region of the world from the Caspian and the Black Seas in the East and South to the Baltic and North Seas in the West and North. Like Cleopatra and Genghis, Attila is one of the most reviled ancient leaders from the perspective of much of Western (or, in the case of Cleopatra and Attila, Roman) history. In the story, as laid out by the film, Attila is drawn into working with the Romans at one point, who, of course, betray him and try to have him killed. He is eventually killed by a new bride, who, surprise of surprises, is brought to him by Rome.

Mongol is a fascinating, sweeping epic film presented in Mongolian and Mandarin with English subtitles, and starring Japanese actor, Asano Tadanobu. It begins on the Mongolian Steppes and effectively shows Genghis Khan's magnetism, charisma, and raw talent (both physical and political) as a young man; one can understand easily why people across Asia would follow him into the largest empire in human history. The ongoing significance of narrative is visible in this case: what many in the West have referred to as the Mongol Horde, most of Asia saw as its lawful home. The talents and successes of this great leader – not unlike Cleopatra – have been vastly ignored in the West for little reason other than strategic denial.

So, why, *Rome*, as the best depicter of how Cleopatra's time has something to tell us about our own? As mentioned, *Rome* is situated in the correct time period. It also displays a growing state built upon corruption, greed, money, blood, and avarice. *Rome* displays politicians and oligarchs selling time with their own daughters for the raping pleasure of other politicians; blood-lust on the part of men and women oligarchs alike; and a brutally low standard of living for the majority of the public. Political corruption and politics for sale (together with human beings) is one of the most notable features. While *Rome* is admittedly more extreme, we have achieved new highs in some of these categories in recent years. At the very least, we seem to have little in the way of honest brokers in politics or media.

Strangely, the following did not make my long list for similarity to our own era: *Mary Tyler Moore*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Fantasy Island*, or *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. These four archetypal modern utopian visions seem to bear no resemblance to our current pre-French-Revolution type of environment. Where did our optimism go? I should say that a few outliers occurred to me as representative for our political era; but, again, they did not work for obvious reasons of periodization. They included: *The Flintstones* (portending our ultimate return to the Dark Ages); *Gilligan's Island* (for me, an obvious attempt to *make nice* of *Lord of the Flies*); and *The Birds* (which, I think, speaks for itself). Kafka, too, came to mind in a number of contexts; however, like Hitchcock, Kafka would bias the results and make them circular in terms of time period, since he is not writing in Cleopatra's era. But, then, writing during the rise of fascism, as he was, he is not supposed to have been writing in our era, either, exactly...

About the author:

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