

ABSENT NOW THE DEAD

EDUCATIONAL TOOLKIT

SAMPLE



Absent Now the Dead

A film by Hamilton Sterling

Study Guide

Study Guide by
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Preface to Instructors

This study guide is intended to serve a broad range of college classes whose aims include teaching the intellectual skills required to make sense of difficult material — classes that want to help students find effective hermeneutical approaches to the material, analyze it, think critically about it, and present their views in cogent arguments. We intend these materials to serve interdisciplinary courses consisting of several of these subjects: film, art, history, literature, ancient studies, music, theater arts, political science, ethics, environmental studies, aesthetics, writing, and rhetoric.

The film, *Absent Now the Dead*, is animated by both a sense of justice and a sense of wonder. It takes as its subject an immediate phenomenon: the rise of authoritarian political movements around the globe. It refracts that subject through the eyes of an ancient character, Thersites — the soldier who publicly challenged the motives of Agamemnon, the Greek commander in chief at Troy, and consequently was beaten in front of his peers. In this film, Thersites comes back to earth searching for a more effective way to address tyranny and the misuse of power generally. However, the film cannot be reduced to its political animus. Its commitment to a more democratic world arises from the filmmaker's sense of wonder — at the natural world's beauty, ferocity, and tenderness — which speaks in the film's music and its cinematography, as well as in the earth's cry for help.

There are several pedagogical advantages to working with this film to teach critical analysis and argumentation. For one, it is difficult. The challenges inherent in analyzing the film, establishing relevant contexts, and researching its components could be made to exceed the few-day effort we have sketched out in this study guide. And for another, it is unique. The narrative takes place in voiceover and in a poetic form. The layering of the cinematography, ancient music, ancient and contemporary themes, and voiceover acting will invite diversity in students' responses.

Flexible material

Because we have designed the study guide to include such a wide variety of courses, we also expect that it will be at once too little and too much. For example, the instructor of a course focused on ancient literature may want to supply more background on the literary sources than we offer, while appreciating the basics we provide on how to enter into a film. Correspondingly, film studies instructors may find what we say about film analysis too obvious while appreciating the historical background we offer. A course in the history of ideas may want to supplement the material with quotes from the long tradition of philosophical and rhetorical essays considering the role of Thersites, but may appreciate the aesthetic approach adopted below. Literature instructors may want to compare the Thersites of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, or the impact of different translations of the *Iliad* on Thersites' character and the themes of power, protest, and egalitarian impulses. And so on.

One implication of the range of courses we are addressing is that our study guide offers instructors a kind of buffet from which they can select according to their course objectives and student level. Another implication is that the sequence of questions below need not be followed

in order, and our advice to encourage students to do an initial cold viewing may be ignored and the guide will still serve well its analytical and argumentative objectives.

Structure and rationale

It may be helpful to consider why we constructed the study and essay questions in their present order. We think that viewing a film unprimed offers the best chance to experience how it animates ones' imagination. To find oneself excited or entranced by some aspects of a film and perplexed by others offers fertile ground for curiosity to flower. Consequently, following the **Introduction (Part I)** focused on general considerations about art, film art, and the art of political film, we propose at the beginning of **Part II** that students first view the film cold, knowing perhaps only its log line, and see how the film sparks their reactions. Those reactions then can form the basis for each student's unique path of inquiry.

Should the instructor want students to have more background before their first viewing despite our preference, then sharing with them the second paragraph of this Preface to Instructors should be helpful, and so should the Filmmaker's Preface, which follows this one.

To prepare students for their second viewing, we suggest that creating a conceptual model of any complex work (a film, opera, novel, etc) is analogous to constructing a building — but one that is incomplete and a bit unstable, for its walls aren't fully finished (they are sometimes more like scaffolding) and tend to move about in relation to one another. We insist that there are many forms of coherence that shape film art; plot is not the only one, and viewers tend to overemphasize it. Any element that tracks with a film's time flow, such as how a character changes from beginning to end, or a pattern in musical motifs or notable sounds or visual metaphors — all these elements can give shape to a work. Coherence does not imply rigidity; there is always space for fresh air to move through a good model. This approach has the additional advantage of preparing students to engage other art films.

Following the procedural suggestions for the first and second viewings, **Part II** continues with **the Study Guide** proper and follows this sequence: (1) Aesthetics, visual and auditory; (2) the script, focusing on the poetic form and the scene construction; (3) the characters; (4) the plot; (5) the title; and (6) themes and ideas. Section 6 is long and somewhat detailed to give instructors the opportunity to tailor the material to their course objectives. It will be important that instructors prioritize these questions and designate the ones they want to focus on in class discussion.

Part III, Myth and History, consists of questions aimed to establish a little historical context about Troy, Mycenaean Greece, the *Iliad*, Thersites, Agamemnon, and Odysseus. While some students and instructors will find these the most interesting study questions, this background is not necessary to appreciate the film, assuming the questions in Part II have been addressed. If on the other hand instructors wish to reference or assign some of the literature that inspired the film script, here is the list of main influences: Homer, *Iliad*; Aeschylus, *Oresteia*; Sophocles, "Antigone" and "Oedipus the King"; Aristophanes, especially "The Knights."

Part IV, Essay Questions, offers 12 questions varying in nature and difficulty. All are intended to give students practice in critical thinking and argumentative writing, and each approaches this task differently. All presuppose that students will have worked through the study questions in Part II, and none requires the historical background of Part III.

In these essay questions, instructors will note opportunities to emphasize or de-emphasize political topics. We have left it to the instructors to prescribe the length of the essays, 1000 to 5000 words. If the instructor wishes, some questions could be elaborated upon and extended to research papers. Finally, we urge students to adopt a voice in their essay, treating it like a speech and identifying an audience more extensive than only whomever will grade the paper. Indeed, in some classes, speeches, dialogues, or debates could replace or supplement written papers.

Appendices

The appendices consist of notes on the music, on the technical aspects of the film's production, and three excerpts from the shooting script that are referenced by various questions.

Filmmaker's Preface: Bringing Thersites to Life

If the western world has a foundational mythology, Homer, whomever or whatever group of bards, scribes, or scholars became “Homer,” stands at the beginnings of it, shaping our civilizational memory. Because European peoples have often been a brutal force on the people, cultures, places, and creatures of the world, creating economic systems that catastrophically degrade the habitability of the earth itself, it is understandable that the foundational stories of that world should come under scrutiny. But at the same time, its wars, plagues, famines, and disastrous leadership have entered the history of humankind through memories recorded by scribes on clay, stone, and papyrus. With memories come lessons, and lessons can be codified into laws which, at their best, can work toward a lessening of the most egregious abuse our sometimes-deranged leaders, politics, and religions can inflict. It is in this sense of lesson becoming law that the western world's ancient stories interest me, and in the impetus for the making of law, such that common sense and human welfare should find a measure of stability and calm.

So where in this history does a soldier of the Trojan war — some say the son of a king, but a sad, ugly son, a man despised by his betters and the common soldiers alike — where does Thersites fit in? While Homer, the *Iliad*, and Homer's characters have lived in the imaginations of human beings for millennia, the character of Thersites has appeared only sporadically in scholarship and art. But Thersites — a precursor to the idea of democracy — is the one man who stood up against the greed and self-interest of Agamemnon and his war. To my eyes, in contrast to all the narcissistic heroes of Homer's epic, he is the one man in this tale with courage. This is the Thersites of my film.

Artists are typically reluctant to talk in detail about meanings in their work. They feel that the mystery of art is often killed by analysis, and that in addition, for the artist to try to draw definitive relationships between images and meanings or between metaphors and historical or geographical reality can rob audiences of having their own enlivening experience. But in fact, works of art can withstand analysis with their magic remaining intact, as the *Iliad* amply proves. In this spirit, the questions below are often open, wanting to spark imagination and thought, and to deepen viewers' experience of the film rather than urging students to lay bare the film's mysteries.

I consider *Absent Now the Dead* to be a kind of poem. I hope that the poetry, together with the music and cinematography, convey to you a sense of the inexhaustible wonder that the natural world inspires, and that by studying the techniques I have used to bring Thersites to life, his spirit will find a place in you.

— Hamilton Sterling

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