

Nancy Shumate
Professor, Department of Classical Languages and Literatures
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063 USA
nshumate@email.smith.edu

Preferred Panel: “Classical Antiquity and Mass Culture” (?)
Title: “*Nero Redivivus*: Nero, George Bush, and the ‘Society of the Spectacle’”
Length: 20 minutes

Abstract:

In January 2007 the cover of the *New Yorker* magazine featured a cartoon of George W. Bush unmistakably assimilated to Nero, playing a lyre while flames shoot up in the background. The synthesis no doubt caused most readers to think of Bush’s “imperial presidency” and its “Neronian” abuses of power.

But there is a less obvious and no less pernicious parallel which would not have occurred to most *New Yorker* readers. Both Nero, specifically the Tacitean Nero, and George Bush in a prominent strain of news reporting about him, operate in a world characterized by “frame confusion,” where distinctions between reality and simulacrum, the authentic and the artificial have completely broken down. For both, images and their manipulation are what really matter; the blurring of boundaries may start with deliberately staged deceptions, but in both cases habitual fabricators eventually spin off into their own self-created reality governed by its own rules. All this is taken in uncritically by a public so glutted on popular entertainment that it can no longer make important distinctions.

The first part of the paper will tease out the parallels in the two narratives, citing relevant secondary literature. In the second part, I will address the question of how to interpret them. There are reasons to be suspicious of “society of the spectacle”-type social criticism: laments about a loss of authenticity are a standard trope in conservative critical discourse from the Frankfurt School to contemporary critiques of the mass media. Still, if the Bush years taught us anything, it is that the post-modern moment of celebrating slippage between representation and reality may be over. Rather than being merely a prototype of a discredited strain of cultural criticism, the Tacitean narrative gains a new credibility for exploring these problems so incisively.