Ancient Greek Women in Film edited by Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos

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This collection is published in Classical Presences, a series which explores the various ways and contexts of reception of the classical past (texts, images and material cultures of ancient Greece and Rome) over the centuries and across diverse media such as theatre, film, literature, and comics.

The thirteen essays which comprise the present volume are arranged thematically around the portrayal of ancient Greek women on screen in five sections. The first three sections focus on filmic recreations of Helen, Medea, and Penelope respectively. The next section discusses the representation of other mythical figures, such as Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Iole, Io, and the Nereids. The last one includes essays focusing on three historical women: Gorgo, Olympias, and Cleopatra. The editor Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos –a scholar who, like most of the contributors, works in the area of classical reception studies– adopted the thematic structure so that 'the mutability' of the screen image of these female figures is better retraced by the readers (p.2-3). The films discussed range from Hollywood and Cinecittà studios productions to independent films and TV movies, but the reader often gets the impression of a crude distinction between mainstream and *auteur* cinema. The book is illustrated with film stills and accompanied by an extensive bibliography.

The essays offer comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives. Employing various methodological tools (gender theory, psychoanalysis, viewer-response theory, sociocultural criticism, etc.), the authors attempt to identify the discursive practices through which filmic narratives re-imagine the mythic and historical past in order to update its relevance and respond to contemporary concerns. As the editor points out, the contributors, instead of evaluating how faithfully a film reproduces its 'source text(s)', underpin the factors which shaped the cinematic recreation of antiquity: the vision of the filmmakers, the physical and ethnic characteristics of the actress, the audience expectations, the sociocultural norms and the political context, the technological and economic conditions of the production (pp.1-3). The aim, as the editor states, is to 'develop a critical idiom for analysing cinematic versions of the classical past' (p.4). However, this aim would be better served if contributions from film scholars were also included.

Bella Vivante's essay centres on how the image of Helen is constructed in Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* (1956) and Michael Cacoyannis' *The Trojan Woman* (1971), giving emphasis on the seductive power of Helen's gaze and the 'gaze' of the spectator. By casting a blonde, Rossana Podestà, in the title role, Wise displays the ideal of all-American, 'good girl' beauty for the audience. At the same time, the film 'contains Helen's legendary sensuality' in morally acceptable limits affirming the 1950s stereotype of women's domestic role (p.27-28). In Cacoyannis' film, Irene Papas as a dark-haired Helen embodies the heroine's sensuality differently. Scenes framed through Helen's gaze convey an empowering female identity that controls the gaze of men and her own destiny. Vivante's approach exemplifies how

the cinematic frame becomes a privileged mode of exploring the way cultural images are produced, reinforced or undermined.

Susan Shapiro demonstrates that Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (1969), starring Maria Callas, is more an idiosyncratic vision of the myth and its religious core than an adaptation of the Euripidean drama. More specifically, Mircea Eliade's theories about the rituals of death and regeneration of nature shaped Pasolini's portrayal of Medea and her act of infanticide. On symbolic level, Jason represents the desacralised, rational, modern world whereas Medea belongs to the archaic religiosity of primitive societies. As Shapiro maintains, Pasolini induces us to interpret Medea as embodying nature itself – a power of fertility but also a destructive force of the irrational (p.114-116).

Annette Baertschi argues that Lars von Trier's *Medea* (1988), a lesser known made-for-TV film, resuscitates the theatricality of the ancient drama performances in the filmic medium. By setting the action in a misty North Sea coast, by prioritizing the natural sounds and silent intervals over voices, he depicts Medea as a repressed cataclysmic force of revenge. Saving traces of the Euripidean Medea who laments the common fate of women (*Med.* 214-266), the Danish Medea is reconfigured both as 'a protofeminist' and 'a Christian martyr' (p.119).

Edith Hall's essay directs the reader to a different, and perhaps more interesting, path. Instead of just discussing the cinematic image of Penelope, she searches 'the Penelopean experience' (p.167), that is, the wife who is left behind waiting, in films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963), Barry Levinson's *The Natural* (1984), Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993), Theodoros Angelopoulos' *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995).

Through these female figures films provide forceful critique on the cultural-historical environment in which they are produced. For example, Anastasia Bakogianni argues that Cacoyannis' *Iphigenia* (1977), an adaptation of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, promotes the anti-war message of the ancient play condemning the sacrifice of an innocent, young girl for the sake of power and politics. Furthermore, by concentrating on the bond between the mother (Clytemnestra) and the daughter (Iphigenia) and 'the agony of its severance' (p.231) Cacoyannis evokes the images of bereaved mothers in Cyprus after the Turkish invasion, which captured in his documentary *Attila 74* (pp. 216-217).

Hallie Rebecca Marshall, in turn, demonstrates that Tony Harrison's film/poem *Prometheus* (1998), broadcasted on UK television is a political comment on the miners' strike of 1984-85 and its aftermath. Reworking Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound,* Harrison recasts Prometheus, the perennial symbol of resistance, as an old mineworker suffering from lung disease; the chorus of Nereids is transformed into women workers in a fish factory who 'are immolated' at Eleusis (p.243) – the birthplace of ancient drama. In the role of Io, a mother from a mining family is running frenzied through Yorkshire to be slaughtered in Eastern Europe. The silenced voices of women articulate 'the communal suffering' after the destruction of the local mining communities (p.241).

Regarding Hollywood films, Konstantinos Nikoloutsos' essay highlights that the Production Code enforced from 1934 until 1968 to protect the public morality set limits on filmmakers. Gorgo, wife of Sparta's King Leonidas, is 'elevated to a symbol of the family and the nation' in Rudolph Maté's *The 300 Spartans* (1962) while she is fashioned as 'an emancipated woman' in Zack Snyder's blockbuster

300 (2007) (p.256; 277). Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones in his essay on Cleopatra in Hollywood's imagination underscores the process of selection, omission, and fusion of ancient and modern elements that lie behind the rhetoric of historical accuracy, mainly for commercial purposes. In Joseph Mankiewicz's epic *Cleopatra* (1963), for example, a glamorous Pharaonic outlook was created for Liz Taylor's wardrobe.

The issue that the collection fails to touch upon is the interrelations between myth, social imaginary and cinema. Treating individual films as case studies, the question why filmmakers and audience return to a figure like Medea or Penelope remains largely unaddressed. Nevertheless, the collection contributes to the growing scholarship on classical reception studies. It is necessarily selective regarding the films that could be discussed but it provides valuable material for students, both undergraduates and graduates, and scholars who are interested in the reception of the classical past in cultural studies and film studies. It might be helpful for teachers who search new ways for enriching their teaching curriculum.