

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*. PANTELIS MICHELAKIS and MARIA WYKE, eds. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xxi + 379. Hardcover, \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01610-1.

Theo Angelopoulos's famous submission for the collection of short films *Lumière and Company* (1995) shows an amazed Odysseus arriving in some foreign land. This fifty-two-second silent film made with the cinématographe invented by the Lumière brothers evokes a host of ideas about the origin and nature of cinema and Western Civilization, and so complements Angelopoulos's search, in all his films, for the origins of personal, family, and cultural identity via the early history of cinema. One of the editors of *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*, Pantelis Michelakis, introduces his essay "Homer in Silent Cinema" with a brief and evocative appreciation of Angelopoulos's short, reminding us that the late director simply could never have seen the many silent films based on Homeric epic.<sup>1</sup>

This fine book represents the fruits of the editors' collaborative research project, *Ancient Civilisations in Silent Cinema*. Some of the contributors originally presented their work at a conference at Humboldt University, Berlin, "Antiquity in Motion," and the research project includes screenings in Europe and the United States and support for the restoration of relevant films held in the Joye Collection of the British Film Institute National Archive. Michelakis and Wyke's Introduction describes the project, the state of scholarship, and the eighteen articles to follow. Most range from fifteen to twenty pages in length.

The project has identified over eight hundred such films made between 1896 and 1928. The vast majority remain unstudied because most—known only from contemporary stills, advertisements, and reviews—do not survive; surviving films await restoration and duplication, and fragmentary or altered films await cataloging; and very few restored films have had any distribution. The Introduction along

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Verreth, "Odysseus' Journey through Film," in *Hellas on Screen*, ed. Irene Berti and Marta García Morcillo (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2008), 65–73, identified some eighty films in which Odysseus figures, but he could actually view only sixteen of them. He mentions five from the silent era. Michelakis identified over a dozen.

with the article by Bryony Dixon, a curator at the British Film Institute National Archive, lay out “The View from the Archive.”

I shall organize my comments according to the project’s research questions. First, why did a new, modern medium give so much attention to antiquity? From the 1910s critics and theorists noticed how cinema could make the dead live again and restore ruins to their original grandeur. They also saw that images in motion suited the rapid pace of modern life. In a brilliant theoretical article, “On Visual Cogency,” Marcus Becker treats these observations generally, and Antonia Lant, “Cinema in the Time of the Pharaohs,” and Laura Marcus, “Hieroglyphics in Motion,” show how film’s restorative powers seemed most evident with respect to Egypt.

Second, how do silent films about antiquity relate to the larger industry? Except for Jon Solomon’s analysis of the challenge to copyright law involved in the distribution of *Ben-Hur* (1907), the articles in this collection address this question only incidentally, usually in relation to classical Hollywood movies and the star system.

Third, how do these films draw on the representation of antiquity in other forms of art and conceptions of antiquity in the nineteenth century? Becker’s study of visual cogency, again, relates to this problem, as do David Mayer’s “Architecture and Art Dance” and Michael Williams’s “Gloria Swanson as Venus.” Ian Christie’s “Ancient Rome in London” describes the business of the new industry as it grew out of other media for the spectacular exhibition of the ancient world.

Fourth, how did contemporary archaeological discoveries affect the portrayal of antiquity in film and how did its cinematic portrayal affect perceptions of the ancient world? Because film aimed at verisimilitude not authenticity, it flattened that perception, as when *Cabiria* (1914) opposes a hyper-classical Rome and a hybrid Orientalized Carthage (Annette Dorgerloh, “Competing Ancient Worlds”) or Buster Keaton’s *Three Ages* (1923) assembles hilarious grab-bags of Stone Age and Roman stereotypes (Maria Wyke, “Silent Laughter and the Counter-Historical”). Becker’s wide-ranging essay, once again, shows how artifacts and narratives validate each other.

Fifth, what aesthetic and political interests did films about the ancient world serve? Martin Winkler’s “From Roman History to German Nationalism” analyzes *Die Hermannschlacht* (1924) in terms of German hostility toward France. Several of the articles notice how comedy can challenge social relations, particularly with respect to the New Woman: Lant on Egypt, Wyke on *Three Ages*, Judith Buchanan on “Judith’s Vampish Virtue,” and Margaret Malamud on “Helen of Troy in the

Jazz Age.” The church approved immoral episodes in Bible-based movies as long as depravity received its due punishment (David Shepherd’s “An Orgy Sunday School Children Can Watch” on DeMille’s 1923 *Ten Commandments*). The fact that only one film (from 1919) about Julian the Apostate exists reflects church-state relations in post-Risorgimento Italy: Giuseppe Pucci, “Peplum, Melodrama, and Musicality.” Finally, Ruth Scodel notices how extensive Jewish participation in the entertainment industry produced an attenuated, vague cinematic Christianity (“The 1925 *Ben-Hur* and the ‘Hollywood Question’”).

Publishers seem to pay no attention to reviewers’ outrage at unreasonably high prices for academic books. At least in this case the purchaser gets a book of high quality in terms of production, editorial control, and scholarship. Many photographs of various sizes (some unfortunately small) illustrate the discussions. A set of colored plates (not referenced in the text), biographical list of contributors, comprehensive bibliography, general index, and index of the 179 films discussed completes the package, which I recommend highly to students and scholars of silent film and classical reception.

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