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Early Film Adaptations of Greek Tragedy: Cinema, Theatre, Culture

Twenty years have passed since the publication of the pioneering studies on Greek tragedy in cinema by M. Macdonald (*The Heart Made Visible: Euripides in Cinema*, 1982) and K. Mackinnon (*Greek Tragedy into Cinema*, 1985). The cinematic landscape of Greek tragedy has changed significantly in the course of these two decades. Apart from the numerous recent film adaptations of Greek plays, old films have also been rediscovered which, in combination with new theoretical approaches in the fields of Classics, Reception studies and Film studies, allow us to reconsider some of Macdonald's and Mackinnon's assumptions about the spatio-temporal framework and generic parameters of film adaptations of Greek tragedy. Drawing on hitherto unpublished archival material, this paper will argue that there are more than two dozen silent film adaptations of Greek tragedy which have escaped the attention of scholars in both classics and film studies. A systematic examination of the relevant evidence shows that an important chapter in the reception of Greek tragedy in early twentieth-century popular culture has so far been ignored. With the help of selected examples, this paper will suggest ways in which this gap can be filled and will argue for a reconsideration of the relation between Greek tragedy, cinema and theatre in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Mackinnon's *Greek Tragedy Into Cinema* starts with the analysis of a silent film of *Prometheus* which was produced in Greece in 1927 and which has often been considered as the first film on the subject. This paper will argue that the relation between Greek tragedy and cinema started well before *Prometheus* and that this film marks not the beginning but the end of the first chapter in the history of the subject. Between 1908 and 1934 numerous Greek plays were adapted for the screen, including Aeschylus' *Persians* and *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Ajax* and *Electra*, Euripides' *Hippolytus*, *Medea* and *Hecuba*, and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. The two plays which have been most popular with silent cinema and on which I will focus my attention in this paper are *Oedipus Tyrannus*, of which there are four adaptations, and *Prometheus*, of which there are five. Special attention will be given to one of the earliest among these films, entitled *Prométhée*, which was directed by Louis Feuillade and produced by the company Gaumont in 1908; and to what is arguably the most important and certainly best documented of the early film adaptations of *Oedipus Tyrannus* which the famous French actor Mounet Sully directed and in which he starred in 1912.

Our sources of evidence for this body of films are limited and problematic. To start with, almost all of these films are now lost. In many cases we are lucky to have stills, posters or other promotional material produced by the companies themselves that made the films. Shreds of evidence can also be derived from reviewers and censors. Another, less straightforward but very useful, source of evidence is the intertextual framework of the films. This includes all those texts, images and cultural practices or historical processes which informed the production or reception of the films, whether directly or indirectly. In this paper I will draw on all three types of evidence arguing that this early and hitherto unexplored area in the cinematic reception of Greek tragedy carries in embryonic form

some of the preoccupations that inform the appropriation of Greek tragedy by cinema throughout its century-long history: first, the cinema's flirting with respected fields of cultural reproduction, especially theatre; and second, the cinema's constant negotiation between high culture and low culture. This negotiation is manifested not only in the thematic preferences and narrative techniques adopted by the films in question, but also in the social and institutional frameworks within which they were promoted and received.