BOOK REVIEW

Greek Tragedy on Screen

by Pantelis Michelakis,

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Narratives, themes and heroes from ancient Greek drama have been present on screen from the first years of early cinema to the present day; a list of films based on Greek tragedy reveals sacred or sacrilegious works, auteur masterpieces or educational television adaptations, avant-garde films, mainstream productions, parodies, and even comic twists of the tragic. In his recent exemplary book that revisits the relationship between ancient drama and film, Pantelis Michelakis shows a wide spectrum of cinematic versions of Greek tragedy, while exploring new questions and perspectives.

Despite the large number of film adaptations, rewritings and influences from ancient drama, only a limited number of monographs are exclusively devoted to tragedy in film. While there are numerous studies that examine the role of antiquity, mythology or ancient themes in film, television and popular culture[1], just a few of them elaborate in depth on the cinematic adaptations of Greek tragedy. The two major monographs date back from the 1980s: Kenneth MacKinnon's *Greek Tragedy into Film* (1986) and Marianne McDonald's *Euripides in Cinema: The Heart Made Visible* (1983)*.* Both studies construct the object of tragedy into film as a homogeneous entity, through the selection of their corpus and through the categorizations they propose. This kind of construction of a homogeneous corpus is evident in McDonald's study, which examines what can be called an *auteur* art-house canon, based mostly on Pasolini's, Cacoyannis's and Dassin's versions of Euripides's plays. Similarly, although MacKinnon's book discusses a wider range of films and approaches, the distinction she proposes between what she calls films in the "theatrical mode", films in the "realistic

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[1] Such as Berti & Morcillo (2008), Nisbet (2008), Solomon (2001), Winkler (2001), Demopoulos (2003).

mode" and films in the "filmic mode" still constructs a rigid homogeneous corpus of study.

However, if we consider a wider selection of films, from early cinema attempts to recent mainstream productions and experimental filmmaking, including new, rediscovered or previously ignored works, we can understand that cinematic tragedy is not a homogeneous material obeying common generic rules; quite the contrary. And here lies the difficulty of a panoramic overview of the dissemination of the tragic in film history. Michelakis turns this problem into the most exciting advantage of his approach, and shows how the discussion of "films united by their common preoccupation with the transfiguration of Greek tragedy in the modern world" (p. 5) is open to plural perspectives of visual, cultural, performance, reception and adaptation studies. As he writes, "[t]he Greek tragedy that emerges from its representations on screen is not a singular and coherent subject. Similarly, the screen that emerges from a discussion of film representation of Greek tragedy does not have a unitary function" (p. 6). However, the author does not attempt to tame this heterogeneity by making strict categorizations in order to provide the reader with a new "canon". He uses instead a hybrid methodological frame and considers the transmediality of cinematic tragedy with links to archeology, architecture, photography, television and, of course, theatrical and dance performances, showing the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach. As the author explains in the introduction, the relationship between film and tragedy also includes the numerous encounters between film criticism and ancient drama: film theory (from narratology to feminist criticism) or psychoanalytical approaches revisit Greek tragedy to explore issues of genre, gender, spectatorship, narrative, and history (p. 3).

The point of convergence of all these approaches, according to Michelakis, is the role of tragedy as a *mediator* (and not as a privileged interlocutor) between modernity and film. This idea reframes concepts that are central to the debate about modernity and cinema, under the perspective of the representations of tragedy, such as the notions of Benjamin's "shock" that reminds us of the Aristotelian "fear", the anxiety of modernity and the healing power of art, the boundaries between high art, popular entertainment and mass culture, the critique of tragedy's elitism, the debate of "tragedy's death" according to Steiner, the possibility of a "community of suffering and the emergence of modern tragic sensibility" inspired by Eagleton (p. 6). Furthermore, a concern about the procedure of film adaptation reveals an expanded list of themes and patterns, and includes the issues of authenticity, faithfulness, nostalgia, origins, violence, sacrifice, pleasure, acting, and spectatorship.

After a compelling introduction, the book is divided into nine chapters that each develops a major theme: *Spectatorship*, *Canonicity*, *Adaptation*, *Word and Image*,

Media, *Genre*, *History*, *Time*, and *Space*. Each chapter makes a close reading of the selected filmic texts, highlighting their narrative, stylistic and technical features, intertwined with the theoretical debate and reception context. The textual analysis is interesting, original and subtle, with a synthetic ability to combine more than two filmic examples in order to develop, with clarity and strength, the main argument of each chapter. The edition is completed by an extended bibliography that supports interdisciplinary approaches and a long filmography that includes only films mentioned in the book. Illustrations, photos and frames from the films are helpful to the understanding of the text.

Many of the overviews of the history of filmed tragedy begin with the fragment of the filmed performance by Eva Palmer *Promitheas Desmotis/Prometheus Bound* at Delphi (1927) shot by Dimitris Gaziadis, forgetting the huge impact of ancient drama on cinema in the first decade of the century, the large number of films based on ancient plays and produced under the influence of the movement of *Films d'art[2].* Michelakis begins the first chapter with the famous and lost film *The Legend of Oedipus* (1913) by Mounet-Sully. His analysis goes beyond the established discussion of the social and artistic status of cinema and the uses of the classics and of academic theatrical practices as an effort of the producers of the new medium to attract a middle-class audience and gain social respectability. Michelakis brings to light archival material regarding the iconography of this lost film (frames and photos from the posters) and also censorship documents, while foregrounding the reception context. His approach shows how much the research on lost filmic texts of early cinema can use a methodology originating from theatre studies and based on secondary sources, resulting from the absence of the primary object and the ephemeral nature of the performance. Furthermore, this detailed archeological approach is not confined to the reconstruction of the lost object and its context. It results in a conceptualization of questions of spectatorship, control and permission of the viewing, an issue that lies at the core of the theoretical debate about the performances of ancient drama since the time of Aristotle – the question of what is permitted to be seen or not. At the same time, it is linked to the main features of early cinema before the establishment of continuity editing – a cinema that does not aim (yet) to guide the eye of the spectator and gives to the spectatorial gaze the freedom to wander within the complex organizations of the frame.

The second chapter tackles another critical debate about canonicity, artistic value, authorship and cultural significance resulting in the construction of a corpus of acclaimed films and *auteurs*. It takes into consideration the question of accessibility (distribution, screenings, home video formats, and archives) and

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[2] In the early 1920s more than 30 film adaptations of ancient Greek tragedies had been produced (p. 4).

institutional practices (festivals, retrospectives, exhibitions, and teaching syllabi) regarding the formation of an established canon of films based on tragedies. The second part of the chapter deals with the subject of realism through a close analysis of Cacoyannis's *Electra* (1962) and Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* (1967)*.* The third chapter expands this problematic by examining the question of adaptation and the way it controls, challenges or adheres to canonicity through issues not only of faithfulness and authenticity, but also of nostalgia and irony. Michelakis mentions Lars von Trier's *Medea* (1988) and the way the filmmaker claims faithfulness to the script by Carl Dreyer as an example of a provocative strategy to capitalize on Dreyer's name in order to promote his film, using both nostalgia and irony in his adaptation method. The chapter continues with an analysis of *Kravgi Gynaikon/A Dream of Passion* (Dassin, 1978) and the various methods of adaptation: intertextuality, self-referentiality and influences that can be found in the film.

The next chapter, entitled *Word and Image*, goes further into a fascinating reading of the poetic features of avant-garde films, focusing on the question of acting style and recitation. In the case of *Antigone* (1992) by Jean Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, a Brechtian genealogy is traced, not only in terms of adaptation, but also in terms of distanciating acting: rhythm, flow, enunciation, intonation and breath are examined in parallel with the *mise-en-scène* in an approach that combines, in a most successful way, film, performance, and theatrical analysis. This theme continues with another emblematic and inaccessible work, *The Illiac Passion* (1967) by Gregory Markopoulos, where again the questions of the narrator, impersonal recitation and even mispronunciation and accentuation are analysed with regards to all morphological features of the film. As Michelakis concludes, "[i]f Straub and Huillet are interested in the chance encounter of disciplined, restrained, non-psychological acting with the sun and the wind, Markopoulos is more preoccupied with the chance encounter between the strict formalism of editing and improvisation of the actors" (p. 95). The following chapter focuses on the intermediality of films based on ancient drama and the relationship of film with dance, theatre and television, taking as a starting point the films *Prometheus Bound* (Gaziadis, 1927)*, My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done* (Herzog, 2009), and *A Dream of Passion* (Dassin, 1978)*.*

Generic conventions, expectations, transformations and hybridities are major issues involved in the process of adapting Greek ancient plays to the screen. They are developed in the sixth chapter, by tracing the influence of ancient drama on genres such as the horror film, the western and the melodrama, and also on the uses of generic conventions with their aesthetics of shock, fear and pleasure in order to "bring back to life on the screen the dead genre of Greek tragedy" (p. 131). The chapter continues with the analysis of the tragic turned into comic

parody in Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995) and with Michael Cacoyannis's *Iphigenia* (1977) as a mixture of melodrama and western ("*souvlaki* western" according to an anonymous reviewer [p. 140]). *Oresteia*, *Antigone*, *Prometheus Bound* are the tragedies discussed in the following chapter, which examines the relationship of Greek tragedy with history and elaborates on the construction of master narratives, fragmentation and continuity, irony and monumentalism through the analysis of three politically-charged films, *O Thiassos/The Travelling Players* (Angelopoulos, 1975), *Germany in Autumn* (Schlöndorff, 1978), and *Prometheus* by Tony Harrison (1998).

The next chapter is devoted to the concept of time and goes back to Aristotle's poetics to trace the numerous interpretations of the aesthetics of "classical" – according to Bordwell – Hollywood narration and the establishment of a goal-oriented, straightforward action, linear causality and continuity editing. We could add here that despite the fertilization of Hollywood cinema by characters and patterns from the Greek tragedy, we count a few memorable films based on an ancient drama that manage to converge successfully the traditions of Hollywood and the narrative patterns of a specific Greek play: Jules Dassin's *Phaedra* (1962) could be considered the most immediate example of the infusion of Euripidian aesthetics into all the parameters of the genre of Hollywood melodrama. Despite the relationship between "classical" American narration and Aristotelian poetics, it is interesting to note that the emblematic films based on Greek ancient plays belong to the art-house, auteurist, modernist, "non-classical" tradition. Here Michelakis focuses on different types of closure in three versions of Euripedian *Medea,* by Dassin*,* Pasolini and Trier, in order to examine the teleological, redemptive or apocalyptic narratives that result from various uses of temporality and closure.

The last chapter considers the thematics of space and discusses the uses of monuments, archeological sites, ancient theatres or modern urban landscapes as film locations, while tracing spatial motifs such as the desert, the ruin, the mountain or the crossroad. The analysis begins with the examination of Cacoyannis's *Iphigenia* (1977) as a combination of symbolic and aestheticised representations of archeological sites, and continues with the less known Ukrainian film *Prometheus* by Ivan Kavaleridze produced in 1935, where Prometheus stands as a national symbol of the Caucasus and, at the same time, as a symbol of the Bolsheviks and the Communist ideology. Finally, the chapter discusses the Japanese version of Oedipus *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) by Toshio Matsumoto and parallels the uses of modern cityscape with the Pasolinian version of the same play. Michelakis shows that spaces in tragedy on screen never stop to underline issues of liminality, transition, exile, enclosure, homelessness, otherness, and wandering.

In the *Afterwards*, the author revisits the idea of Jean Anouilh that tragedy is a machine and opens a dialogue with Eagleton, who links Anouilh's idea to predetermination, fate and destiny. Michelakis here does not insist on the role of fate, but highlights the idea of tragedy as a machine with references to Brecht and Müller: "the formal integrity of tragedy, its stillness and stringency, its mysteriousness, the double sense of entrapment and tranquility that it offers, and our aesthetic delight in it are all related not only to destiny but also to the machine" (p. 217). This idea results in the linkage of tragedy to modernity, anxiety, shock and technology, and finally to cinema, as a *dispositif,* as a powerful system of narration and spectatorship, as another perfect machine.

The importance of Michelakis's monograph lies in the fact that it proposes an open ending, instead of a closure, and encourages multidisciplinary perspectives and methodologies for the study of films based on tragedy, that take into consideration narrative, stylistic and generic elements, production and reception procedures in relation to other arts and media. Numerous ideas found in this book could generate new readings and could be used as a starting point in order to study the reappearance of tragic references, for example, in contemporary Greek cinema. Recent Greek films, which have attracted international attention at major film festivals, revisit Greek tragedy, as for example the melodramatic *Strella/A Woman's Way* (2009) by Panos Koutras that brings to mind Matsumoto's Oedipus while parodising Cacoyannis's aesthetics, *Macherovgaltis/Knifer* (2010) by Yannis Economides that indirectly refers to Angelopoulos's *O Thiassos/The Travelling Players,* or Yorgos Servetas's powerful character of Antigone in the Greek western *Na Kathesai kai na koitas/Standing Aside, Watching* (2013)*,* shot in contemporary Thebes during the economic crisis. These are only a few of the recent Greek examples that show the uses of tragedy as a promotional strategy for a national cinema in order to address an international audience, as a reference to authenticity and origins in order to claim artistic status, or as a way to facilitate the understanding of a specific sociopolitical reality through archetypal narratives and characters.

Greek Tragedy on Screen is a valuable addition to the series of Classical Presences of Oxford University Press under the direction of Lorna Hardwick and James I. Porter that not only shows the importance of film theory and criticism in the fields of classics, ancient history and reception studies, but also testifies, once again, to the enduring and universal appeal of ancient tragedy to contemporary questions and contexts.

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