

Helen's Gaze: Cacoyannis' Complex Portrayal of Helen in his 1971 Film, *The Trojan Women*

In Euripides' *Troades* Hekabe warns Menelaos about Helen:

Avoid looking at her, lest she seize you with desire.

For she captures the eyes of men. (891-2)

In this paper I will examine how film director Michael Cacoyannis cinematically explores these lines from Euripides' play in his 1971 film, *The Trojan Women*. While Helen is generally perceived in ancient literature and modern film as the object of the gaze of men, both the ancient dramatist and the modern director invert the subject and object of the expected mythic/dramatic/cinematic gaze and the position of whose gaze has power. Cacoyannis' film portrays to a modern audience what Euripides' language evoked for an ancient one—what it means for Helen's gaze to have power. Superbly enacting this portrayal is the powerful Greek actress Irene Papas. My presentation will require powerpoint projection.

Pivotal for this examination is the critical use of the concept of "the gaze" in theoretical film literature. Since Mulvey's 1975 article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," "the gaze" has been posited as that of the male spectator by and for whom most images, especially those of the female are fashioned, in order to gratify heterosexual male (sexual) desire. Helen, as she is conceptualized in both ancient and modern media, epitomizes the "*to-be-looked-at-ness* [of] ... woman displayed as the sexual object ... of erotic spectacle" (Mulvey 11). Hekabe's statement in Euripides' play suggests a different approach to the male gaze, one that constructs it as vulnerable, weak and powerless against the immense power of the female. From this perspective this female gaze is dangerous, like looking upon Medusa, but instead of turning men to stone, gazing at Helen melts men, causing them to become impotent, understood polysemously. With the attribution of

this power over the male gaze to her, the figure of Helen may be seen as focalizing two different constructs of the male gaze: through the Western cultural tradition she has served as the icon of the woman to be gazed upon to stir men's desire, and she also evokes the danger men risk from gazing upon a sensual, sexually potent female.

In this examination I will show how Cacoyannis uniquely among modern film directors explores this complexity of Helen as conveyor of these two different approaches to the concept of the gaze. Brief comparison with two other film portrayals of Helen, Robert Wise's 1955 *Helen of Troy*, starring Rosanna Podesta, and Wolfgang Peterson's 2004 *Troy*, with Diane Kruger as Helen will show these two films as a foil for Cacoyannis' presentation in several ways—1) their singular use of the gaze as a male construct for male pleasure; 2) their stereotypical representation to a modern Western audience of Helen as a “blonde sex symbol”; and 3) their inability, because of reasons 1 and 2, to portray Helen with any of the depth and complexity she embodies in the ancient literature. As a Greek director, Cacoyannis dramatically reveals his appreciation of this ancient complexity, and as a Greek actress, Papas powerfully brings this portrayal to the screen.

This examination is unique in modern Classical scholarship that treats cinematic portrayals of ancient themes. Solomon's 2001 brief mentions of these films do not analyze their themes. McDonald and Winkler's 2001 interview with both Cacoyannis and Papas does not address the subject of Helen's portrayal from the perspective here proposed. Cyrino 2007 presents a detailed examination of Helen's characterization in Peterson's *Troy* in comparison with her portrayal in the *Iliad* and *Cypria* also without this analytic approach to Helen's portrayal in that film.

Hence this distinctive examination of Cacoyannis' and Papas' unique cinematic portrayal of a complexly powerful ancient Helen will contribute innovative ideas to this modern subject of Classical scholarly endeavor. And it will expand scholarly appreciation of the complexity with which Euripides draws his dramatic characters.

Cyrino, M.S. 2007. "Helen of Troy." In Winkler, M.M., ed., *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mulvey, L. 1975 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3: 6-18.

Solomon, J. 2001. *The Ancient World in the Cinema*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.

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