

## Illusion and Reality: Historical Costume and Everyday Fashion

The complex relationship between the ancient world as historical reality and the ways it has been represented in film since the advent of modern cinema continues to intrigue scholars. In her 2005 book, *Big Screen Rome*, Monica Cyrino asks whether films about the classical world can “expand our knowledge of the ancient world” and also what they can tell us about our present society in general and popular culture specifically (2).

This paper will examine the interplay between the ancient and modern worlds by looking at the ways contemporary fashion trends of the period of a film’s production influence the ways ancient costume and style are depicted. I look at four different films produced over a period of 65 years to explore how costume designers intertwine the changing styles of women’s dress, hair, and makeup with audience’s expectations for the illusion of historical reality. I juxtapose images from fashion magazines of the various decades with images from the movies to show how the films inevitably reflect as much about their own time period as they do about the classical world. The four films I examine are: *Cleopatra* (1934) with Claudette Colbert; *Quo Vadis* (1951) with Deborah Kerr; *The Trojan Women* (1971) with Vanessa Redgrave, Genevieve Bujold, and Irene Papas; and *Jason and the Argonauts* (2000) with Jolene Blalock.

Costume designers face a significant challenge when commissioned to design period costumes for any film set in the past. Unless the filmmakers have decided to work against realism (as in Julie Taymor’s 1999 film *Titus*), designers must do three things simultaneously: create an illusion of historical reality, conform on some level with the beauty expectations of their own time period, and play against previous films to create a fresh view of the past, showing both innovation and continuity. The issue of beauty is particularly problematic because perceptions of what is beautiful, especially in regard to women, color viewers’ reactions to

characters. I argue that this is true because styles change more rapidly, and perhaps dramatically, for women. How are our sympathies for female figures a response to their physical appearance? And how is this response conditioned by the body and beauty ideals created by dress, hair, and make-up styles from any historical period?

#### Bibliography

Cyrino, Monica. 2005. *Big Screen Rome*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell.