

Historicizing Women's Costumes: Anachronisms and Appropriations

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.

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 will 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 audiences' expectations for the illusion of historical reality. Juxtaposing images from fashion magazines of the various decades with images from the movies, I will show how the films inevitably reflect as much about their own time period as they do about the classical world. The four films to be examined 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 *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. How are

our sympathies for or antipathies against female figures a response to their physical appearance? What judgments do viewers make about the personalities and motives of female characters based on their dress? And how are these responses conditioned by the body and beauty ideals created by the dress, hair, and make-up styles from any historical period?

While students of the classical world are eager to point out the anachronisms of any film that deals with antiquity, scholars have continued to assert that the more important issues are the aesthetic and cinematic uses of anachronisms—what their purpose and effects are in any particular film (see essays in Winkler, 2004, 2007). I will argue that anachronisms are vital for a film about the past to have appeal for its present audience and that presentism, in fact, allows modern viewers to appropriate classical culture in a productive way and to see the relevance of the past for the present, helping people experience and understand the ongoing viability of classical studies in today's world.

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