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Silent Dramas: Two Early Film Adaptations of Greek Tragedy

The first film adaptations of Greek drama date to the era of silent cinema. More than a dozen films of Greek drama were produced during the early decades of the twentieth century but are largely ignored by Macdonald and Mackinnon in their seminal work on the reception of Greek drama in cinema (1983 and 1985 respectively). The aim of this paper is to examine two of these films, the now lost *Oresteia* (UK, 1921) and the extant *Prometheus* (Greece, 1927). The *Oresteia* was produced in Cambridge, to record a theatre production of the trilogy by students of the University of Cambridge. *Prometheus* was made in Delphi and was based on the stage production of the play which featured in the first Delphic Festival by Eva Palmer and Angelos Sikelianos. My paper is divided into two sections: the first section explores the relation between the two films and the theatre performances on which they were based; the second section examines the institutional and cultural framework within which the films were consumed.

The two films aimed at preserving in a documentary mode two of the most progressive and ambitious theatre productions of the time, acclaimed for their lavish costumes and sets, and for their excellent acting. Yet far from being simple records of theatre productions, the two films followed the editing, framing and narrative conventions that silent cinema had developed by the 1920s. They were divided into acts, they provided a very brief description of the plot through intertitles and at the same time they put emphasis on aspects of the stage versions that were visually striking. For instance, the dances by the Chorus were presented in full whereas the static dialogues among the leading characters were shortened. The two films show how early cinema projected its own aesthetic of performing Greek drama. On the one hand early cinema displayed recent advances in the fields of choreography, music, and costume and set design; on the other hand it played down the neo-Aristotelian preoccupation of the theatre of the time with language.

The films of *Oresteia* and *Prometheus* did not simply preserve two theatre performances of Greek tragedy, but also made them accessible to wider audiences. If the stage versions of the two plays were performed in the geographically and culturally marginal locations of Cambridge and Delphi, the films were shown in the urban centres of London and Athens. Special screenings were arranged for school children, followed by public lectures on Greek drama. Moreover particular care was taken to guarantee the superior quality of the recordings: the task of the production was assigned to film companies with technologically advanced equipment. Early cinema opened up new possibilities for the modernization and popularization of Greek drama. At the same time the new medium had to cater for the different tastes of its diverse audiences. The films of *Oresteia* and *Prometheus* enable us to catch a glimpse into the complex nexus of cultural practices that informed the early reception of Greek drama in one of the more public arenas of twentieth-century cultural activity.