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Visual education: Silent cinema, Roman history, and the American high-school curriculum

This paper explores the mutually beneficial relationship – a brief condition of symbiosis - that emerged between cinema and classics in the United States in the 1910s.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the study of Latin peaked in the high schools of the United States of America. As working-class children started to enter secondary education en masse, they (or their parents on their behalf) chose Latin as a means of social advancement, not least because it was still compulsory for admission to American colleges. By 1910, as many as half of all high school students were enrolled in Latin programmes and were reading first Caesar, then Cicero, Virgil and other Latin poets (Kelsey 1927; Morford, 1966; Winterer 2002). Yet, at the same time, American intellectuals and educationalists hotly debated whether the study of antiquity should have a place in the modern world and in a nation that perceived itself to be liberal, democratic and forward-looking (Waquet 2001; Winterer 2002). In response, high-school classics teachers, university professors, and other educationalists developed and disseminated a whole array of pedagogic strategies to present Latin (and, therefore, Classics) as engaging, relevant, and topical for American children. The pages of classics journals and the reports of professional associations became filled with enthusiastic support for the new feature-length motion pictures set in ancient Rome now arriving in the States from Europe (Wyke, 2006, on the example of the Italian film *Cajus Julius Caesar*). Filmed antiquity was accessible, entertaining, popular and modern, capable of giving the lie to any hostile conception of classics as a dull instrument of the elite wielded only to hammer out gentleman, generals, and presidents.

The motion picture industry was as quick as the educational establishment to see what filmed antiquity could do for it. Renditions on screen of the destruction of Carthage, the assassination of Julius Caesar, the martyrdom of Christians in Nero's arena, or the last days of Pompeii seemed capable of conferring a sheen of modernity and a popular appeal on Classics, but they could also confer on the burgeoning film industry a veneer of tradition, cultural authority and utility which it so eagerly sought and which was being demanded of it by the Better Films Movement. Exhibitors regularly bought in European 'epics', distributed them to university film exchanges, and supported their non-theatrical distribution to local schools, colleges, churches, and civic associations across the United States. American film archives contain vivid testimony to the cultural and commercial success of this bond between antiquity and modernity (as in the George Kleine Collection, the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress).

This paper investigates and analyses the excitement with which cinema and classics collided with each other in the 1910s. It explores how the technological development of film and its changing modes of historical reconstruction came to find favour with classicists. Among the legion of filmed reconstructions of Roman history produced in Europe in this period, which ones were selected for importation to the States and mass distribution? How did distributors remodel these reconstructions for American consumption (through editing, music, English intertitles, and directed publicity)? What aspects of these films found most favour among educationalists? What types of historical criticism did they incur? What vision of ancient Rome did the films construct and what modes of engagement with antiquity did they solicit? Finally, although historical reconstructions of Roman history continued to be screened at, for example, the Third Annual Conference of the Latin teachers of Iowa in March 1921 or the Classical Association Conference in Richmond the following month, this paper considers why the symbiosis of classics and cinema came apart in the years after the Great War and before the advent of sound.