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2008

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/12548>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Michelakis, Pantelis: An Early Film Adaptation of Sophocles' OEDIPUS THE KING: Cinema, Theatre, Photography. In: Henri Schoenmakers, Stefan Bläse, Kay Kirchmann u.a. (Hg.): *Theater und Medien / Theatre and the Media – Grundlagen – Analysen – Perspektiven. Eine Bestandsaufnahme*. Bielefeld: transcript 2008, S. 205–209. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/12548>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839410646-018>

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AN EARLY FILM ADAPTATION OF SOPHOCLES' »OEDIPUS THE KING«: CINEMA, THEATRE, PHOTOGRAPHY

PANTELIS MICHELAKIS

It is common for accounts of the reception of Greek tragedy in cinema to begin with a silent film of Aeschylus' *PROMETHEUS* which was produced in Greece in 1927.¹ As the record of a theatre production, the film falls neatly into an evolutionary narrative which wants early film adaptations of Greek tragedy (i) to be tools at the service of contemporary theatre productions rather than serious contenders and, perhaps, (ii) to originate from the same geographical region where Greek tragedy was born. However, even a quick look at film archives and collections in Europe and America suggests that between 1908 and 1934 more than twenty-five films of Greek tragedy were adapted for the screen, of which the Delphi *PROMETHEUS* is one of the last. These included adaptations of Aeschylus' *ORESTEIA*, Sophocles' *ANTIGONE*, *AJAX* and *ELECTRA*, Euripides' *HIPPOLYTUS* and *MEDEA*, and Aristophanes' *LYSISTRATA*. The two plays which have been most popular with silent cinema are *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*, of which we now know of four adaptations, and *PROMETHEUS* of which we know of five.

Many of these films are now lost but those that have survived, together with production stills, posters and other ephemera, testify to a fascinating but hitherto neglected chapter in the history of early cinema. For someone working at the intersection between classics, theatre studies and film studies, the significance of this body of films is difficult to overestimate. On the one hand its challenges evolutionary and teleological narratives which privilege later paradigms of cinema and which recycle stereotypical views of the silent era as primitive and naive. Ranging from documentaries of stage performances to ambitious reworkings of the original plays for the new medium, the films in question shed light on a diversity of traditions, methods, technologies, and spectatorial practices available to early cinema. On the other hand, this body of films challenges the foundations of the neo-Aristotelian, logocentric tradition that celebrates the originality of the dramatic text and condemns the derivative and ministerial role of its modern enactments. Silent cinema does not dispense with the dramatic text altogether but it recasts it into images, intertitles, and often pre-performance lectures and music, in ways which have profound implications for the tragic narratives concerned. What I want to do in this paper is to substantiate some of these claims while also exploring some of the methodological issues raised by research into lost films with the help of examples drawn from one case study.

1 See, for instance, Mackinnon. The film was the recording of a stage production of Aeschylus' (?) *PROMETHEUS* produced in Delphi during the first theatre festival to take place in modern Greece.

The best-documented, and arguably most important, among the now lost films on Oedipus is the one in which the French stage actor Jean Mounet-Sully starred towards the end of his long career, in 1912.² Entitled *THE LEGEND OF OEDIPUS* (*LA LÉGENDE D'OEDIPE*), the film was directed by Gaston Roudès and consisted of four acts, each corresponding to one film reel or fifteen to seventeen minutes of screening time.³ The film must have been just over an hour long, that is, longer than any other film of Greek tragedy that I am aware of from this period. The extant stills from this film with which I am familiar are scattered in collections in Paris (Bibliothèque du Film and Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie Française) and Vienna (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek). One of them illustrates the scene of Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx. The composition engages with a pictorial tradition that includes well-known nineteenth-century paintings of Oedipus and the Sphinx such as those by Gustave Moreau and Dominique Ingres and which goes all the way back to Attic red-figure vase paintings of the fifth century BC (see, for instance, the red-figure kylix from the so-called Oedipus Painter, ca. 470 BC, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, Inv. no. 16541). Other stills illustrate the arrival at Thebes of a young Oedipus played by Jean Hervé, the supplication by the citizens of Thebes of a more mature Oedipus, played by Mounet-Sully, in a composition reminiscent of the opening scene of Sophocles' *OEDIPUS THE KING*, the encounter between Oedipus and the prophet Tiresius, and Jocasta, surrounded by priests and citizens of Thebes, appealing to Apollo to purify the city in a scene also familiar from Sophocles' play. Two stills depict Oedipus' discovery of Jocasta's body after the revelation of his true identity. Another still shows the blind Oedipus and his two daughters shortly before he goes into exile. If the first of the stills mentioned above invites comparison with the pictorial tradition of the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx, this last one has a different intertext, a photograph of the stage production of Mounet-Sully as Oedipus predating the film by some ten years, which travelled around the world on the front cover of the French theatre magazine *Le Théâtre*.⁴

THE LEGEND OF OEDIPUS was released in France in December 1912, in the USA in January 1913, and in Austria in March of the same year. It was an ambitious film not only in terms of its huge and expensive décors, glamorous costumes, technically demanding outdoor scenes, and its neo-classical atmosphere and meticulous attention to historical accuracy, but also in terms of narrative composition. The film is not the recording of a stage production but, as its title suggests, an attempt to tell the whole story of Oedipus, to retell Sophocles' play in a manner appropriate to the generic parameters of the new art form. Breaking away from the narrative of the theatrical original and challenging the neo-Aristotelian unity of time and space of contemporary theatre, the film included episodes such as Oedipus' killing of Laius, his encounter with the Sphinx and his confrontation with the body of the dead Jocasta (Birett: 209, 341).

Only the last two of the four acts of the film were devoted to the events dramatised in Sophocles' play. But even these displayed a preoccupation with action and

2 On Mounet-Sully's life and career see Mounet-Sully and recently Penesco 2000 and 2005.

3 See Chirat/Le Roy, no 03830; Bush; *The Catalog of Copyright Entries*: 601. Mounet-Sully was the protagonist of a much more theatrical version of the same subject, entitled *OEDIPE-ROI*, which was directed by André Calmettes in 1908. On this film, see Chirat/Le Roy; Bardèche/Brasillach: 44-5.

4 This photograph is reproduced in Armstrong. Production stills and posters of the film are reproduced in Bush, Tarbox: 147; Werner.

with showing rather than telling which is alien to Sophocles' original. Some thirty years after Mounet-Sully's first triumph at the Comédie Française in the role of Oedipus, the star now provided a new and ambitious version of the myth and the character of Oedipus for a different medium. In this, Mounet-Sully anticipated Pier Paolo Pasolini's *EDIPO RE* (1967), with its bold condensation of the narrative of Sophocles' play and its reordering of the sequence of events in line with their chronological occurrence, by more than fifty years.

Although little is known about the reception of *LA LÉGENDE D'OEDIPE* in the various countries in which it was released, the censorship records of Germany and Austria enable us to catch a glimpse of the sensitivities of the time. Mounet-Sully's Oedipus was deemed unsuitable for children in both Austria and Germany. In Germany, no less than six scenes were cut in addition: Oedipus' killing of his father, his killing of the Sphinx, his cutting off of her head, his display of the head in Thebes, the display of Jocasta's hanging body, and Oedipus' blinding of himself (Birett: 209 and 341; Werner: 125).

Greek drama may be obsessed with social taboos such as patricide, incest and self-mutilation, but it rarely visualises the often vivid narratives of violence and horror which are usually reported by eye-witnesses. The film on the other hand did not only gesture towards – but in fact centred its attention on episodes which were only verbal in the original. The still of Oedipus' confrontation of the hanging corpse and blank gaze of dead Jocasta illustrates how early cinema could operate both as an apparatus of horror and as a vehicle for the melodramatic exhibition of bodily suffering and pain. Similarly, Oedipus' decapitation of the Sphinx, and the display of her severed head as trophy in Thebes mark the film's departure from both Sophocles and classical mythology, and align Oedipus with the action heroes of silent cinema. By focusing on taboo issues under the veil of serious drama and art, the film shows how early film adaptations of Greek drama blurred the distinction between high art and popular entertainment, cultural conventions and their transgression. Early cinema could challenge bourgeois morality and aesthetics while also seeking to reaffirm them.

What I have tried to show so far is how an early film adaptation of a Greek play, for all its institutional and aesthetic affiliations with Greek tragedy as a dramatic text and as a living theatrical tradition, maintains its artistic autonomy from theatre. What I would like to do next is to show that the relation between cinema and photography raises similar methodological challenges to the film historian. Moving away from the rhetoric of authenticity and objectivity conjured up by terms such as »evidence« and »data«, I will try to challenge the idea that the cinematic performance can be recovered in a more or less pristine state if the »alterations and distortions« of photographs, posters and other types of »sources« are ironed out. The appeal to film reception of the empirical methodology of sources and of the »impartiality« of the research practices of historiography may be strong, not least because of the sometimes large amount of new knowledge and information into which it taps. However, the most interesting work in film reception, as, I would add, in performance reception, takes place not at the level of accumulation and sequential listing of empirically accurate knowledge, a necessary but not sufficient condition for analysis best left to theatrical annals or cinema databases, but at the level of identification, evaluation, and analysis of this knowledge.

Like the stills of theatre productions, the stills of lost films have a double history, serving different functions before and during the release of a film and when the

film is no longer screened and fades from personal and collective memories.⁵ As instruments of the publicity mechanisms of film promotion and distribution, production stills stand for a spectacle yet to be seen. As objects at the hands of film or theatre historians, they become traces of a text which can no longer be read. In the former case they perform the function of teasing and provoking. In the latter case they appear as incomplete, impoverished fragments. In both cases the production still plays with the notion of death and discloses competing and conflicting takes on it. Like photography in general, stills thematize death both as absence, as ghostly and shadowy presence, and as permanence and fixity. A good example for thinking about the playful attitude of photography with death as both permanence and absence is the still which displays with shocking realism the hanging body of Jocasta. Showing what should not be seen, what prompts Oedipus to blind himself and what is never enacted on stage in Sophocles' tragedy, the still had an important role to play in the publicity campaign of the film. However the scene to which the still refers was censored and could not be shown. If the still promised a complete and literal objectification of the female body, a moment of masculine, voyeuristic pleasure, the censor forbade the screening of the relevant scene as one in which social norms break down, where voyeuristic pleasure threatens to destroy, rather than sustain, reality. Photography, then, illustrates not what the original spectators of *THE LEGEND OF OEDIPUS* saw, but what they were first promised, and what they were then forbidden to see. In doing so, it provides an alternative way of seeing, providing insights not only into the assumptions about the supposed pleasure of viewing but also into the regulatory mechanisms of early cinema. The still may shed light on a censored scene but at the same time severs the composition from its original narrative context, stealing something from cinema and reducing it to a frozen frame. The filmic narrative is not the only context from which the picture severs its subject. A different version of the same photograph, held in the Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie Française, includes the beams which support the roof of the studio above the sets of the film, breaking the illusion of realism and exposing the <constructedness> of spectacle the picture seeks to communicate. If the production still reveals what one must not see (whether one identifies with Oedipus gazing at Jocasta or with the spectator watching the censored version of the film), at the same time it also hides the larger picture of the realities of its own production, circulation and preservation. In its turn, the picture which discloses the workings of the production still has its own larger context which, however hard one looks at the picture itself, will not be revealed. Like the theatrical conventions of fifth-century Athens and the regulatory mechanisms of early cinema censorship, the politics of acquisition and public display of pictures in the context of contemporary research in the humanities provides a context in which the desire to know and the pleasure of seeing can be mutually exclusive.

In Sophocles' *OEDIPUS THE KING*, the issues of knowledge and vision are juxtaposed in unexpected and challenging ways. These same issues intersect in the methodologies involved in the reception of lost films. To reconstruct the *LEGEND OF OEDIPUS* one needs to draw not only on Sophocles' dramatic text but also on early twentieth-century theatre, ancient and modern iconography, censorship records, posters, and photography. The film has been transmitted to us neither as a material object nor as a self-contained narrative but through its visual and textual traces. None of these traces is filmic. They are scattered in a variety of media with their own preoccupations, possibilities and limitations. What is more, some of these

5 On the relation between photography and theatre, see Hodgdon.

traces relate to segments of the filmic narrative which were not screened. Far from unproblematic, then, filmic traces hide things they should show and show things they should hide, always concealing at least as much as they reveal. Filmic traces are not so much pieces of a jigsaw waiting to be reconstructed for the larger image of the film to come forth in all its glory. On the one hand they are like the negatives of a photograph, or backstage glimpses of a theatre performance. On the other hand they act as nested Chinese boxes or Russian dolls that never end. Unlike the death-like certainties of the fictions projected onto the cinematic screen, the realities behind the screen defy closure. Neither irretrievably lost nor fully present, early films of Greek tragedy emerge through an uneasy and complex relation between knowledge and vision, past and present, between cinema, theatre and photography.

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