

Conference Summary

The international conference, “Antiquity in Film – Gender on Screen” took place at the Freie Universität Berlin, December 10–12 2009. It drew 32 scholars from Germany, Europe, the UK and North America, some of whom are established and renowned in their field, others who proved promising graduate students, as well as 7 more distinguished scholars who were invited as moderators. As the title suggests, the conference centered on the portrayal of gender in the cinema’s reception and reproduction of ancient myths and history. Keynote speaker Jon Solomon, who has written seminal works on the reception of Antiquity in film, opened the conference with an historical overview of the relationship between reception of Antiquity, film and existing power structures, especially in the USA, providing an opportune springboard for other presentations that were to look at specific films and their portrayal of Antiquity and gender in finer detail. Films under consideration ranged from blockbusters like *Troy* to auteur films such as Pasolini’s *Medea* and Cacoyannis’ Euripides trilogy, to TV series such as *ROME*, *Xena, Warrior Princess* and *Hercules*.

The conference spanned three days and seven, at times parallel, panels. The varying panels looked at various aspects of gender, antiquity, and film, taking into consideration the meeting (or clash) of ancient and modern representations of gender. These included not only representations of the feminine, the masculine and homosexuality or homoeroticism, but also the reproduction of power structures, the exploitation of the human (both male and female) body, imperial power and issues of “Otherness”. Although mostly focussing on Greco-Roman Antiquity, topics from ancient Judaism and Christianity were also represented, thereby giving the term “Antiquity” a wider scope than ancient Greece and Rome.

The Panels:

Thursday, 10 December 2009

Jon Solomon, the conference’s keynote speaker, opened the talks with a paper on the representation of Antiquity in Hollywood cinema as codifications for power structures, from its earliest days to the present, including the Bush era and current administration.

The first panel *Conflicting Masculinities*, looked at the 2004 Hollywood film *Troy*. In his paper, *Nur über seine Leiche*, Andreas Kraß compared forms of male love and friendship in Homer’s *Iliad* and Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy*, showing how these have been transformed from Homer’s representation of erotically charged male relationships to comparatively de-erotized ones tailored to contemporary (American) audiences.

Barbara Weinlich’s presentation, *Gendered Conflicts – Conflicts of Gender: The Character of Briseis in Wolfgang Petersen’s Troy* wove together the problematics of conflicting dualities, not only of gender, but also of the destructive and civilized aspects of human nature, especially vis-à-vis Hollywood’s response to 9/11.

Celina Proch and Michael Kleu delivered a paper, *Maennlichkeitsmodelle vor den Mauern Trojas*, comparing the socially constructed representations of masculinity, embodied by Achilles and Hector, in the *Iliad* and Petersen’s film version of *Troy*.

Friday, 11 December 2009

Projection Screen Rome

In Panel 1, Andrea Sieber delivered a paper on Fellini’s *Satyricon* and the use of ancient histories and their idiosyncratic re-presentation in the film to make statements about the present, while Andre Wendler’s

paper *Von Rom zu ROME* looked at the use of the historical television drama to represent contemporary ideas about gender, rather than accurate representations of ancient ideas and practices.

In Panel 2, Margaret Toscano's paper *The Womanizing of Marc Antony* discussed the hyper-eroticization of Antiquity in film and television, and the entertainment industry's attempt to keep audience interest primarily with shocking sexual transgressions.

Anise Strong's paper *Roman Debauchery and Modern America* looked at representations of ancient Rome in film, its repeated use as the topos for the sexually and socially miscreant, who among other things "bend" gender, in contrast to the wholesome minority reproducing socially constructed models of gender and sexual virtue.

Strong Men/ Strong Women

Panel 1 looked at representations of masculinity in *Spartacus* and film representations of Heracles. Sascha Trültzsch and Thomas Wilke looked at *Spartacus* in their presentation *Spartakus und die Gladiatoren*, using theories from Media Studies to analyze film's representation of gladiators to make statements about current political situations and/or gender models, and the existing social and aesthetic constraints and demands made on the film medium itself.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler's and Xenia Zeiler's presentation *Xena in antike Gefilden* dealt with the representation of the feminine in *Xena*, how this is informed by select myths not only from Antiquity but also from Christianity, Hinduism and another mishmash of religious traditions.

In Panel 2, Alexander Juraske (*Large Spartacus versus Small Spartacus*) discussed how the demands of the Hollywood film medium and American social mores determined the filming of Kubrick/Douglas' *Spartacus*. In their presentation *Herakles und die Amazonen*, Jon Albers and Johannes Pause analyzed the evolution of the filmic representation the myth of Heracles and the Amazons and how this evolution parallels social and political developments in Western conceptions of gender.

Strong Women

Paula James' presentation on Pygmalion, *In pursuit of the Perfect Woman* looked at 1940's representations of the Pygmalion myth and considered what this meant in terms of gender relations and their power dynamics both historically and at the time of their filming.

Amanda Potter's presentation *Who needs a Homeric hero when we've got Xena?* looked at the way the television show reclaims and reverses many gender characteristics to (re)form the character of Xena for modern audiences and tastes.

The Persian War and the Battle of Thermopylae – 300: social-political Functionalizations

Ralph Poole's talk, "Everybody Loves a Muscle Boi." *Die Homoerotisierung des Feindes als post-9/11 Persiflage der 300 Spartaner* examined *300* as a parody of gender and racial constructs in post-9/11 America. Thorsten Beigel's presentation *Hollywood goes Thermopylai* dealt with and compared the representation of women, men and homosexuals in *300*, *Meet the Spartans* and Frank Miller's *300 Spartans*. In his presentation "This is Sparta!" *Gender and the Orient in Zack Snyder's 300*, Jeroen Lauwers considered the representation of gender and gender relations, and how film functions to reinforce existing constructs.

Saturday, 12 December 2009

Gendered Viewing: Ancient Themes in Contemporary Contexts

Matthew Fox's paper of the first panel, *Gender and Antiquity in Rossellini's Journey to Italy* looked at how Rossellini uses ancient themes in the story of a modern married couple to highlight issues of gender and gender relations, and their relationship to the ancient world. Elena Theodorakopoulos' presentation

Gender and Antiquity in Godard's Le Mépris also used Antiquity as a backdrop for a consideration of modern marriage, itself a social construct.

In her paper, *Ancient Women's Cults and Rituals in Grand Narrative on Screen*, Svetlana Slapsak looked at the transformation of mythical elements from Snowwhite to Olga Malea's feminist parody *Doughnuts with Honey*. Lada Stevanovic's paper *Medea by Pier Pasolini* reflected on the various aesthetic – visual, acoustic and linguistic – tools the film uses to produce the desired sense of “otherness” – of both the protagonist “Barbarian” among the Greeks, and of Antiquity for the modern viewer.

In her presentation *Cacoyannis revisited*, Dr. Kirschnik discussed in the second panel the portrayal of the (female) body in Cacoyannis' *Euripides* trilogy, while Anastasia Bakogianni discussed in her paper, *Feminizing Greek Tragedy*, Cacoyannis' sympathies and sympathetic representations of women in this trilogy, portraying relationships between women and how they are disrupted by men.

In the paper ‘*Include me out*’ – *Odysseus an den Raendern des europaeischen Genrekinos: Le Mepris, Ulysse und L'Odissea*, Christian Pischel looked at how film and TV-shows uses contemporary filmic devices in representing gender, and how it reproduces (or contradicts) the rules of genre-cinema. Barbara Schrödl used the ancient mythological figure Phryne from an Art historical perspective to compare gender relations in the post-war German film *Die Suenderin* in her paper *Phryne auf dem Weg ins Wirtschaftswunder*.

Female Martyrdom and Male Passion? Antiquity and the Meaning of Religion

Tal Ilan's presentation *The Talmudic Torah Scholar Beruriah and Israeli Cinema* juxtaposed the ancient figure of Beruriah, the first female Talmudic scholar, with gender issues in contemporary Israel. In her presentation, ‘*Kadosh*’: *Filmische Darstellung der antiken Religiositaet*, Darja Sterbenc Erker compared contemporary Orthodox gender relations with ancient Roman marital rituals and mores.

Nicholas Kalospyros' presentation *Understanding the Language of Suffering* considered the representation of Christ in film, from the post-war period to the present-day, looking at how it engages with concepts of masculinity and religiosity.