

Jerome Lecture #1, Ancient Rome in Silent Cinema: Antiquity & Modernity

Speaker: Prof. Maria Wyke

Host Department: Department of Classical Studies

Date: 03/11/2015

Time: 4:00 pm

Location: The Keene Theater, East Quad, 701 E. University Ave.

Description:

In recent years, Hollywood has released a number of big-budget films set in antiquity, yet cinema has been fascinated with the ancient world and with Roman history in particular ever since it emerged as a new technology more than one hundred years ago. Within a few months of the first public shows of moving images held in 1896, Nero was brought onto the screen trying out poisons on his slaves, and hundreds more films about ancient Rome were made thereafter. The vast majority of these films remain largely forgotten although they still survive in archives across the world. Yet the persistent presence of ancient Rome in early cinema compels us to ask: why did so modern a medium have so strong an interest in antiquity right from its start? What did ancient Rome do for cinema? And what did cinema do for ancient Rome?

The first lecture will set the scene for more detailed discussion subsequently of the three national film industries that reconstructed their own distinctive versions of ancient Rome on screen from the 1890s through to the arrival of sound in the 1920s – France, Italy and the United States. Consideration will be given to the relationship of early cinema's Rome with the Rome of other nineteenth-century arts, both high (theatre, opera, dance, painting, the novel) and popular (circus shows, pyrodramas, puppetry and magic acts); the development of specifically cinematic technologies for the reconstruction of Roman history; the use of Rome on film to stimulate a collective national and imperial consciousness; and the cinematic reconstruction of the Roman past as a means to explore and, at times, to challenge modern concerns about religion, politics, ethics, class, gender and sexuality as well as the value of the new medium itself.

Bio

Maria Wyke is Professor of Latin at University College London. She has written extensively on Roman love poetry and ancient gender and sexuality, on the reception of Julius Caesar in Western culture (*Caesar: A Life in Western Culture*, 2007; *Caesar in the USA*, 2012), and on ancient Rome in cinema (*Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, 1997; ed., with P. Michelakis, *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*, 2013). Most recently she has co-authored with Christopher Pelling a short work that explores why classical literature still has relevance today, *Twelve Voices from Greece and Rome: Ancient Ideas for Modern Times* (2014).