

Latin and Greek in Movies

There has been a lot of literature on movies about events, stories, cities, persons, and even entire eras of antiquity. See, just to name a few, the series entitled *Screening Antiquity*, Davies 2019, or Wyke 1997. There are movies that try to bring Roman comedy to the screen. And there are movies on, for example, Shakespeare's adaptations of ancient literature. Thus, this paper wants to fill a gap. How have Latin and Greek as a spoken and written languages been used and handled in movies? The answer will not be a surprising one: it depends on what is intended by using these languages. What seems to be almost more important, however, is to start collecting the material and surveying the field.

There are movies that were shot in Latin: Matteo Rovere's *Il primo re* (2019). In Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) the Romans and even, on occasion, Jesus speak Latin. The movie was criticized for not giving Greek a chance to be heard as the then *lingua franca*. It will be interesting to look at *The Passion of the Christ 2: The Resurrection* in this regard next year.

Secondly, there are movies in which a few scenes use Latin or Greek. *Wonder Woman* in 2017 used the Greek idiom to enable Wonder Woman to win a contest over who is better at speaking foreign languages. She even needs to know a (fake) quote from Thucydides to impress General Ludendorff. (Unfortunately, that quote is not rendered in Greek. Otherwise, the fake maybe would have been noticeable right away.) Thomas More's daughter Margaret is not only able to stand her ground in a conversation in Latin with Henry VIII in *A Man for All Seasons* (1966). Henry VIII even feels threatened by her skills, which clearly exceed his. The same is true for Jim Evers in Rob Minkoff's *The Haunted Mansion* (2003). His daughter Megan is able to

translate a Latin inscription on a tomb that is vital for the rescue of her mother and instantly reminds her dad that he was not in favor of Latin when she had to choose a foreign language in high school. Even James Bond knew some Latin in 1969 (*On Her Majesty's Secret Service*) and 1999 (*The World Is Not Enough*). Therefore, those superheroes who emulate him, Robert Langdon, and Indiana Jones need to know it as well: for example, in Ruben Fleischer's *Uncharted* (2022). 2022 also saw the release of *The Lost City*. The latter movie uses Latin as a foreign language and implicitly discusses its merits and demerits as well as its social and intellectual status.

Finally, there are those movies who use Latin literature and have it read out loud – even sung. Ingmar Bergman (*The Seventh Seal*, 1957) and Ridley Scott (*The Last Duel*, 2021) show that movies can also venture into medieval Latin. Stephen Daldry's *The Reader* (2008) on its tour through world literature uses a few snippets from ancient literature. Matthew Vaughn in 2021 employs Horace in his movie *The King's Man*. The famous line from Horace's ode 3.2 (*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*) is used in a sermon in front of soldiers who are about to be sent off to war. The line returns later during a funeral in Wilfred Owens poem *Dulce et Decorum est* (1917). The movie demonstrates an important and misguided part of the history of the interpretation of this line from Horace's *Roman Odes*. In 1960, Jiří Krejčík utilizes selected quotes from Seneca's letters and Tacitus' passage on Cremutius Cordus in his *Higher Principle*. Especially the latter text (*ann.* 4.34f.) is looked at from various angles as it is chosen as the final exam in Latin in a high school of a small town near Prague in the midst of the aftermath of the assassination of Reichsprotector Reinhard Heydrich. The translation and interpretation of this text as it is brought on the stage of this movie lets two sides of a discussion appear that is still ongoing today. While Krejčík's local commander of the Gestapo knows ancient literature, he

apparently thinks that those texts are an obstacle adequately to explain the superior present. Professor Málek, the Latin teacher who seems to be a little out of touch with reality, however, proves to be the only one who (unsuccessfully) dares to do something against the rampant injustice which even finds willing collaborators. The close and slow translation of Tacitus' text within the movie, however, makes the movie's message all the more urgent and relevant.

Literature

Screening Antiquity is edited by M. S. Cyrino and L. Llewellyn-Jones.

Davies, C. O. G.: *Blockbusters and the Ancient World. Allegory and Warfare in Contemporary Hollywood*. London 2019.

Wyke, M.: *Projecting the Past. Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*. London 1997.