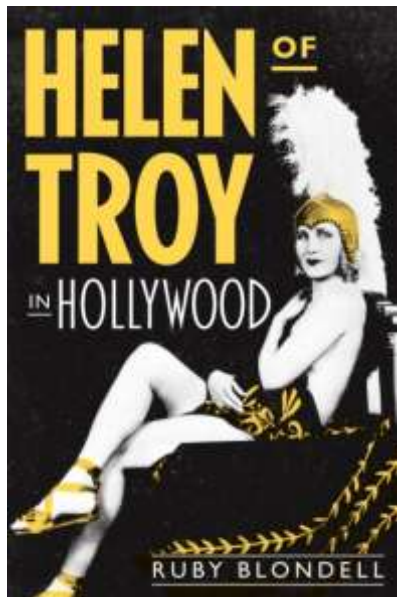


Helen of Troy in Hollywood

Review by Zsófia Anna Tóth



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by Ruby Blondell.

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The author's aim is to highlight that the figure of Helen of Troy as phenomenon is still with us today. Ruby Blondell planned to overview the most outstanding popular products that pay homage to this legendary female figure. In her opinion, the Trojan War as a topos is still a recurrent theme in American cultural products, especially in films, becoming "a cornerstone of middle class American culture" (ix), which might seem at first as a bold statement. Blondell argues that her main focus is on films made in Hollywood because this site is the "epicenter" of American cultural works as an "institution with worldwide influence" (x). However, the book also mentions that an ancient story can perhaps tell more about us today than about the original culture, time and context it was produced, as the remaking and retelling of it is about how we, today deal with such a trope and what it means to contemporary people and cultures. We are still fascinated by figures of mythical proportions as Helen of Troy, and, it seems, she can still speak to us. The high versus low cultural dichotomies also emerge in the adoption of ancient tropes and Blondell's book points out that even if popular cultural products aim primarily to entertain, they also do more than that. Moreover, Blondell questions the issues of authenticity especially because of the story's 'historical' nature, while discussing historical accuracy in the case of an ancient myth that can be compared to walking through a quagmire (the author admits this and, paradoxically, does not intend to get entangled with fidelity or history concerns any further, which might be a gap some readers miss). The author emphasizes that the figure of Helen of Troy is quite embedded in American culture by suggesting its relatability as well as recognizability especially in popular culture, yet one is still wondering if greater masses can really see this mythic embeddedness.

Of course, Helen of Troy's greatest allure as a cultural icon is her world-famed beauty and how she can break havoc on people's lives even to the point of generating one of the biggest wars of humanity. Her figure also implies the question of good and evil and whether beauty can reconcile with both—or not. In addition, Helen's irresistible beauty can be either a blessing or a curse and whether these attributes can give her agency and control over her own lives as well as over others' lives, or render her the victim of circumstances. The author of *Helen of Troy in Hollywood* highlights several stories that deal with her eponymous figure in various ways but the amount of works is vast and varied to cover everything; so Blondell concentrated only on those works that present Helen "as a specific character from a specific tradition," at the intersection of "the reception of Greek myth and the history of beauty" (xix). The list of selected works where Helen is taken under scrutiny within the scope of this book is Alexander Korda's *Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927), Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* (1956), Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004) and eventually a television miniseries, *Helen of Troy* (2003). Yet, Blondell points out that she approaches these films and the TV miniseries from the point of view of a classicist with knowledge of visual culture and film studies, so her approach has its obvious limitations. Nevertheless, this study of modern and postmodern reinterpretations of an ancient phenomenon at the center results in an educational and informative text helping us understand current events through a diachronic approach. In this regard, Blondell's book is helpful to both students and scholars of ancient cultures as well as modern and postmodern ones, especially because it has its focus on visual and popular culture, a making it a valuable read. Moreover, the book occasionally employs a humorous tone, making it a pleasurable reading.

The first chapter of this book focuses on the Early Hollywood period. One of the first things emphasized here are the heroines transposed from antiquity and usually interpreted in terms of heroism and masculine traits but in connection with Helen of Troy this parallel does not fit since she is intrinsically connected to femininity and female beauty. Helen she is typically

presented as a feminine hero, considered representative of the *eternal feminine*. However, there is more consideration of the definitions of beauty here and namely on what principles and why somebody thinks somebody is beautiful (or not), showing the unreliability of beauty standards and its objectivity, as Margaret Wolfe Hungerford put it with “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” (16). The book also shows the impossibility of realism in films by calling it “illusionistic realism” (20) of visual arts especially those in relations with the representation of various Helens. In addition, the book addresses the question of who can be cast in Helen’s role, as a distinguished beauty within the matrix of the star system. A very insightful comment is, however, that no matter how Helen of Troy looked like (or looks like in her current versions), her desirability is her strongest function, since she functions as a justification for men’s actual pining for wealth and power, with the real reason for the Trojan War, or now for certain conflicts, being not Helen(s).

The second chapter of Blondell’s book focuses on *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927) directed by Alexander Korda, a silent comedy aimed at “fairly civilized, fairly literate” audiences with some “feminist” (39) leanings. Here, the book provides a thorough analysis of the film, the titular character as well as all of the surrounding details of the production such as the director and the lead actress, María Corda (the director’s wife), the favorable reviews—all compared with other works and artists of the cinema of the time and placed within context. The third chapter of the book carries readers into the time of the “Big Screen Epic” (83) and we are enlightened about Robert Wise’s *Helen of Troy* (1956). Thanks to director, the treatment of Helen was a “revisionist” one (89), which involved her vindication and stressed her innocence while pressing for social justice, equality and tolerance as a general message—as opposed to the typical visual narratives about ‘bad’ women. The film, despite its innovative representation of Helen was an unfortunately failure, the author concludes. The fourth chapter elaborates on Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy* (2004), which is similar to Wise’s version in many respects because both the director and the scriptwriter, David Benioff, were enchanted with the 1950s grand epic tradition, which they tried reuse. However, this film not really work out that well, making the figure of Helen merely a paler remake of the 1956 figure; but she was even less: the 2004 Helen turned out to be a figure with less agency and more passive than in any previous versions, while the narrative focus shifted entirely to a certain “masculine heroism” (135), male prowess and bravery targeting young males as warriors, especially powerfully ideologized in the aftermath of 9/11. In Petersen’s narrative, Blondell concludes, Diane Kruger’s Helen turned into a bland, average presence, almost insignificant within the whole film narrative in which even her supposed eroticism was shifted onto a male body, that of Achilles played by Brad Pitt.

In the third part of the book, we wander into the realm of television. The fifth chapter focuses on various televisual renderings of Helen in the twentieth century. Since there are many such stories, the author pays attention to two cases, *Star Trek* (1968) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1996), both of which dedicate an episode to the representation of modern Helens. In the sixties, filmmakers managed to create an unusual and exceptional Helen, who was quite transgressive both from a gendered and a racial point of view reaching a balance between challenging and accepted notions of femininity as well as reinforcing them by having this agency. In the nineties, Helen was provided with a revisionist and remarkable reinterpretation of the story: Helen is not treated within the constraints of romantic entanglements but Xena saves her by teaching her how to be a free and independent person as a result of which Helen acquires agency and empowerment leading her to a liberating future. The sixth chapter of Blondell’s book deals with the 2003 *Helen of Troy*, as depicted in the TV miniseries, later released on DVD. The miniseries was fraught with many clashing opinions, especially concerning its reviewers, critics and audiences. Its primary aim was to resituate Helen’s representation in the third millennium from a feminist point of view and this was exactly something resulting in very polarized responses. The miniseries managed to show more than a contemporary Helen; it was a rather realistic view of our current culture embedded in an ancient myth, with actual avenues of female liberation opening up along the narrative.

Blondell's new book attempted to cover a number of (re)interpretations of Helen of Troy and her turbulent story depicted by the visual narratives of Hollywood and American television in given decades of the 20th and 21st century. Although the book has a number of good insights and interesting analyses in its chapters, there is a need for an overall conclusion. The reader wonders then why all this matters today and how these stories connect in various cultures or not and why we need these remakes. Despite this lack, the book is an interesting and thought-provoking work about the visual representation of women in American films.