

**Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*,  
Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006.**

**ISBN 1405131829**

I feel there is something I must confess before I start. I did not enjoy Wolfgang Petersen's film *Troy*.<sup>1</sup> I hated it. I never bothered to see it at the cinema and it took me two attempts to watch it at home for the purposes of this review. In the end, I only made it through by fast forwarding some of the battle scenes and because I needed to finish my weekly ironing. *Troy* is either a) an extended ode to men's hair and/or Brad Pitt's naked flanks; or 2) an epic indulgence in violence (pun completely intended). I am neither a Brad Pitt fan, nor a lover of glorified screen violence.

But enough about me. What do thirteen classicists make of *Troy*?

In his introduction to *Troy: From Homer's 'Iliad' to Hollywood Epic*, editor Martin A. Winkler establishes the credentials of the collection's twelve contributors (including himself), claiming that their training in 'classical history, archaeology, or literature' when combined with 'strong interests in the cinema and its importance for the survival of antiquity today', means that they can shed light on the intersections between the myth of Troy, its various literary incarnations, and the films that it has spawned. In particular, Winkler highlights that all of the writers 'adhere to the belief that a simple dismissal of the film as yet another instance of deviation from a sacred tradition is beside the point.'

So, does the rest of the collection meet this challenge? Do the chapters engage with both classical studies and more modern ideas about film history and aesthetics? Does the collection do more than compare the Petersen film (and others) with Homer's *Iliad* and then rate it on a scale of good or bad?

The tone is set by the opening placement of the contribution by the German archaeologist Manfred O. Korfmann, who was a director of the excavations at Troy-Hisarlik. By placing such a piece at the start of the collection two important things happen: one, the reader is given an argument – by a declared specialist in the field – that there is evidence that Troy existed; and

two, all following chapters are therefore to be read within this framework. Thus the Trojan War, and all literary and filmic representations, despite any claims to the contrary, are based on history. The discussion of whether the Trojan War truly occurred is clearly something that Korfmann was passionate about, and his essay provides some interesting insights into the archaeological evidence. However, the connection to filmic representations of the Trojan War, including Petersen's, is tenuous at best. The opening discussion of *Troy* is unconvincing, a late addition to Korfmann's real interest: the archaeology of Troy-Hisarlik. Disappointingly, this is a pattern that is repeated in most of the following chapters. They read as though the references to Petersen's *Troy* – or indeed any other films – were little more than an afterthought.

Of the sixteen pages of Joachim Latacz's chapter, only three include a discussion of Petersen's film. Winkler's main chapter is more a lament that Italian filmmaker Franco Rossi never made a film version of the *Iliad* than an analysis of the ways in which the Trojan War has been translated into cinema (successfully or not). His other contribution (the last chapter) – a filmography – is predictable and limited in its choices. Georg Danek focuses on the ways in which the story of the Trojan War evolved from its most famous incarnation in Homer's *Iliad* through to the version told by Dictys the Cretan and Dares the Phrygian in 300 – 400 CE. One of the few openly positive responses to *Troy*, Danek highlights a tradition of removing the Gods from the story of the Trojan War; thus by explaining the events of the story through actions of its human protagonists, *Troy* sits quite comfortably within a long standing literary tradition.

I must admit that I expected more of Jon Solomon, a professor of cinema studies, but, his analysis of *Troy* is little more than a discussion of its literary traditions and includes a theoretically outmoded idea of the role of the spectator as passive receiver of the cinematic text.<sup>2</sup> Even more disturbing than Solomon's outdated theoretical framework is that it is not until near the very end of J. Lesley Fitton's chapter that she admits to having been involved with the production of Petersen's *Troy*. A fact, that, given her chosen topic matter on the role of the historical advisor, Fitton should have stated at the beginning (and is curiously absent from her bio at the front of the book).

There are some contributions that rise above the limitations of Korfmann and Co.; Alena Allen's chapter is an interesting discussion of the role of Briseis in Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Heroides*, and Petersen's *Troy*. While there is no analysis of the visual aspects of the film, Allen does make reference to D. Elly's *The Epic Film: Myth and History*, revealing at least some awareness of the substantial field of work in film, history and myth that is seldom mentioned by the other contributors.<sup>3</sup> Stephen Scully opens with the idea that a film does not need to be an exact replica of the poem; he argues that some of Petersen's inventions, like having Briseis kill Agamemnon, were 'splendid'. Compared with many of the other contributions to this collection, Scully's chapter focuses on the film *Troy* to a much greater degree; it is a genuine analysis of the film and its relationship to the work of Homer.

However, the very best examples are the chapters by Kim Shahbudin, Monica S. Cyrino, Frederick Ahl, and Robert J. Rabel.

Shahbudin's chapter focuses on audience reactions to Petersen's *Troy*, and the deliberate attempts by both the filmmakers and marketing executives to engage in a historicisation of the Trojan War story. Shahbudin argues that the relationship between the audience and the film's publicity (and later the film itself) means that an audience reading of the film as an adaptation of Homer's the *Iliad*, and more importantly a historically 'real' Trojan War, is the most likely result. Unlike Solomon, Shahbudin discusses previously held ideas about film audiences as passive receivers and highlights that this is no longer the accepted assessment of the relationship between films and their viewers: she argues for a more active relationship. Shahbudin is the first author in collection to point out that the reading of such a film by trained classicists is a privileged one that does not translate to other audience groups (or indeed even the film's producers). Her awareness of film theory surrounding style and genre is apparent when she references the work of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger in her analysis of *Troy* as constructed within the classic Hollywood style in a deliberate move to emphasise its claims to realism.<sup>4</sup> This chapter is one of the most 'filmic' in the collection. In particular, it actually engages with film theory and the relationship between the 'past' on the screen and the time in which the film

was made. However, while Shahabudin argues for an anti-war message in *Troy*, she does not take this to its logical conclusion by connecting it to its post-9/11 American context.

Cyrino's chapter is a comparison of the story of Helen as told in the *Iliad* and in the *Cypria* with her storyline in Petersen's *Troy*. Completing a scene by scene analysis of the sections of the movie that are relevant to Helen, Cyrino does not condemn any narrative or plot changes that were made. She is also the first author to refer to the film's post-9/11 American context; suggesting that the use of Helen as an excuse to attack Troy would trigger for the audience a memory of the American search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Cyrino's analysis even includes a discussion of the visual construction of some of the themes using a cinematic language: for example, the use of pans and long-shots. However, ultimately the chapter suffers from the lack of any discussion of how current gender politics may have affected the representation of Helen.

The main focus of Ahl's contribution is a discussion of various allegorical representations of war in both writing and film. His numerous references include classical epic poetry like Virgil's *Aeneid*, books by American writer Kurt Vonnegut, and films like Petersen's *Das Boot*, *Jason and the Argonauts* and even *Star Wars*.<sup>5</sup> It is a fascinating exploration of the intersection between popular culture, high literature and classics that manages to present films as worthy additions to cultural interpretations of the classical. Ahl argues that the meaning of the Trojan War has undergone change and re-appropriation from its earliest moments; that this is the purpose of myths. Thus, any reinterpretation on Petersen's part in *Troy* is just one in a long line of versions of the original myth. Ahl is also the only other contributor (Cyrino being the first) to mention possible links between Petersen's vision and the American war in Iraq. However, in this case he argues that connections are unlikely to have been deliberate on the director's part. Ahl places more emphasis on extra-textual filmic references like 'the film's visual echoes of Darryl Zanuck's production *The Longest Day* and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*'.<sup>6</sup> One of the best contributions by far, Ahl reveals a real ability to see film as part of a broader cultural re-appropriation of the Trojan War

myth, and displays a fabulous sensitivity to the visual aspects of the film, including a wonderful description of Achilles in battle.

Rabel's chapter is, unlike any other, an actual analysis of the film *Troy*, which includes some references to the *Iliad*. In comparison, most of the other chapters are analyses of the *Iliad* that happen to have some passing references to the film *Troy*. This chapter is an analysis of how *Troy* departs from the 'original' story of the Trojan War by embodying a modern concept of realist politics (specifically patriotism and allegiance to country) that 'rest[s] uncomfortably in an ancient Greek context'. Rabel does not highlight this departure to criticise, instead using it to explore how the present day political climate affected Petersen's re-imagining of the Trojan War. The chapter is broken into sections based on four aspects of realist politics: 'struggles for power'; 'power and human nature'; 'balance of power'; and 'the true nature of power'. In each section the relevant contemporary political theory is discussed and then visual and narrative examples are given as to how they are embodied in *Troy*. The analysis includes a discussion of the difference between 'hard power' (war, aggression) and 'soft power' (charisma, charm) as embodied in *Troy* by Agamemnon and Achilles. It explores Hector and Achilles as the embodiment of two particular conceptualisations of 'individual goodness' in reaction to group immorality: patriot (Hector) and idealist (Achilles). The attainment of a balance of power in *Troy* is shown in two forms, through direct opposition or competition. Finally, *Troy* 'fully dramatizes the realist concept that ideology is a pretext'. The article exemplifies the idea that the past is most commonly referred to, or represented, for the purposes of the present; an idea that has become one of the main themes in contemporary historical analysis of film and television. The only real problem with this chapter is a lack of a conclusion that brought the various strings of the argument to a close.

This collection is not the first time that Winkler has written about or edited a collection that discusses the links between film and classics. In addition to his single author text *Classical myth and culture in Cinema*, Winkler has recently edited a series of books for Blackwell Publishing, including *Spartacus: Film and History* (2007), and *Gladiator: Film and History* (2004).<sup>7</sup> Reviews of

Winkler's other publications possess a theme: that the idea behind the collection is good, that there are some moments of interest, but that overall there is a sense of lost opportunity, that the questions of real interest are never asked or answered.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, this is not a problem that he has managed to overcome in *Troy*. There is a really interesting idea at the heart of this collection, but the potential is never fully realised.

Despite the cover image of Petersen's Trojan Horse, the sub-title, and the abstract on the back, this collection is a literary exercise much like that described by Danek: the reader is expected to engage with a reworking of the Homeric epic, where the humour and challenge is for the well-read, classically-educated reader who finds pleasure in identifying the minute allusions, challenges and parodies to the original. Unless you have a committed interest in the Trojan War or Troy, there is little in this collection that will interest you. If you are looking for an introduction to the interdisciplinary field of film and history (or myth), this book is definitely not the place to start.<sup>9</sup>

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> *Troy*, dir. Wolfgang Petersen, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of the spectator as passive receiver of the filmic message was a feature of early film theory and criticism. However, along with a number of other changes in the 1970s, film theory has moved on to embrace the idea of the spectator as an active participant in meaning making. Spectatorship (also known as reception studies) is now a well established sub-field of film theory and criticism. The most (in)famous and influential article on spectatorship is Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 16, 1975, pp. 6 – 18.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Elley, *The epic film: myth and history*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The classical Hollywood cinema: film style and mode of production to 1960*, Routledge, London, 1988

<sup>5</sup> *Das Boot*, dir. Wolfgang Petersen, 1981; *Jason and the Argonauts*, dir. Don Chaffey, 1963; *Star Wars*, dir. George Lucas, 1977.

<sup>6</sup> *The Longest Day*, dir. Ken Annakin (British exterior episodes), Andrew Marton (American exterior episodes), Bernhard Wicki (German episodes), Darryl F. Zanuck (uncredited), 1962; *Saving Private Ryan*, dir. Steven Spielberg. 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Martin M. Winkler (ed), *Classical myth and culture in the cinema*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See: Andrew Horton, 'Review: *Classics and Cinema*,' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No.1 (Autumn), 1992, pp. 30 – 31; Matthew Hancock, 'Review 3: *Gladiator*: Film and History,' *Metro Magazine*, Issue 145, 2005, pp. 174 – 175; Maria Wyke, 'Are You Not Entertained? Classicists and Cinema,' *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Winter, 2003, pp. 430 – 445.

<sup>9</sup> All film details are taken from: the International Movie Database (IMDB) <http://www.imdb.com/>