CHAPTER FIVE

Viewing *Troy*: Authenticity, Criticism, Interpretation

Jon Solomon

When classicists view a film set in antiquity for the first time, their reaction to the film is never the same as that of the non-classically trained audience. The viewing process bypasses the usual modes of passive reception and sensual spectatorship that apply to the viewing of most contemporary Hollywood films and becomes by default an intellectual endeavor.[1] Because of the critical and pedagogical nature of their discipline, classicists approach the cinema with essentially the same mindset they apply to evaluating a colleague's article or even a student's term paper. Classicists are on the lookout for a variety of irregularities, scanning a broad spectrum of signals that do not belong to the vision of the classical world they have honed during decades of study, research, and teaching. Did the Greeks reside in huts or tents outside Troy? Could Achilles have been blond? Is that an accurate portrayal of a sexual encounter between Achilles and Briseis? And wasn't Agamemnon killed in his bath at home by his wife Clytemnestra and not in Troy by Briseis?

Academic concerns tend to dominate scholars' viewing experiences. For two or three hours we are responsible for knowing more about the

1 Contemporary theorists recognize that artistic illusion is not unique to film viewing. See Richard Allen, "Representation, Illusion, and the Cinema," *Cinema Journal*, 32 (1993), 21–48, and Murray Smith, "Film Spectatorship and the Institution of Fiction," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53 (1995), 113–127.

ancient world than we could possibly know. Many of the questions we ask ourselves are easily answered from our areas of general knowledge or fields of specialization, but some lie on the outer fringes of, or even completely outside, our familiarity. What actually happened during the Greek landing at Troy? How long did the historical Trojan War last? Our expertise is potentially challenged at every new line of dialogue or camera angle: art historians and archaeologists search their philological memory banks, and philologists search their visual memories.

When the viewing is finished, the classicist may expect a barrage of questions from students, colleagues, family, and even the press and ultimately may be asked for a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" judgment about the film's merit. With all its mistakes and oddities, can such a film be shown in class?

This is no way to watch a movie.

Viewing circumstances can be even less suitable. Films like *Troy*, Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), or Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) have such high-profile releases that a number of classicists attended premieres or early showings, sitting bundled together in small groups. Some may be pondering what this or that colleague knows or is thinking that they themselves do not. Professional prestige and even competition come into play, and if a junior faculty member attends a showing with a senior, the former's career is a consideration. A similar mindset will also interfere with the teacher who views one of these films with students who will expect from the scholar to know everything about the film's historicity and authenticity.[2]

This is no way to watch a movie.

2 On film, history, and students see Ron Briley, "Reel History: U.S. History, 1932–1972, as Viewed through the Lens of Hollywood," *The History Teacher*, 23 (1990), 215–236.

Probing several points along the classical tradition in this way should help us broaden our perspective of spectatorship insofar as a film like Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* is concerned. The primary purpose of producing a commercial artistic project costing almost $200,000,000 is not to please either academics (least of all classicists) or film critics who like to think that their reading of the *Iliad* in college qualifies them as Homeric scholars. The primary purpose is to create a successful product, that is, a work popular enough to earn back the investment and many millions in profit. To accomplish that, the product has to inspire considerable initial interest; epics do not qualify for the status of "sleepers" whose reputation slowly spreads via word of mouth. The pre-release advertising campaign of a blockbuster like *Troy* is itself a multi-million dollar project. The release itself involves another large investment when a film opens on as many as several thousand screens simultaneously. All who have large stakes in the outcome hope that television and newsprint critics will complement the enthusiasm generated among initial audiences viewing the film in theaters. In many instances there are also simultaneous and subsequent merchandising campaigns, all aimed at generating additional millions of dollars. Simultaneous sales usually include posters, books, toys, and other retail products; for the highest-profile releases there are tie-ins with fast-food franchises. After-market sales include DVDs, soundtrack CDs, and, in rare instances, theatrical re-releases.[10] Each of these is a multi-million dollar enterprise.

This summary is not intended to be an amateur business primer for anyone interested in developing a Hollywood property based on an ancient text or narrative. It is intended to highlight how unimportant the classicist is in any part of the business of popular filmmaking. As a result, while it is inevitable that classicists will analyze, criticize, and make professional judgments about a film like *Troy* in the process of viewing the film, especially for the first time, it is important for us to put such analyses, criticisms, and judgments in perspective. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, and *de gustibus non est disputandum*. But errors in authenticity, anachronisms, improprieties, and other faults, or the judgment that the filmmakers have failed to generate the same depiction of the

10 *Gladiator* was re-released in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Germany, the Netherlands, and Taiwan in March, 2001. More than 500,000 copies of the DVD were sold in the United Kingdom in 2000, surpassing the sales of any other film.

Trojan War that scholars have developed after years of research and thought, do not mean that the film is neither good nor successful. At the very least, such a conclusion is an unfair criticism of a commercial product that has not been designed to meet scholarly standards; in the extreme, it also reveals ignorance of the progress that scholarship in popular culture has made in the past three or four decades.

If classicists could transform themselves briefly into journalists, policemen, lawyers, or soldiers while viewing such well-received films as *Citizen Kane*, Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973), Billy Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), or Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), they would soon realize that no professional could watch a popular film without identifying numerous errors, inconsistencies, improprieties, and downright impossibilities in the depiction of what falls under the purview of their professional knowledge and experience. On the other hand, a filmmaker who pays painstaking attention to technical detail, as Tyrone Guthrie did with his *Oedipus Rex* (1957), does not necessarily create a great or successful film. By far the most influential sequence of Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*, hailed as "the thinking man's epic," was its most unhistorical moment, the rousing shouts of "I'm Spartacus!"[11]

11 Despite the fact that *Spartacus* was produced well over forty years ago, the "I'm Spartacus" scene still reverberates, most recently in a Pepsi Cola commercial first aired during the 2005 Academy Awards. Other examples are David Seltzer's *Punchline* (1988), Tom Hanks's *That Thing You Do* (1996), Frank Oz's *In and Out* (1997), Martin Campbell's *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), and perhaps Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992). The scene was spoofed in Terry Jones's *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979).

All this leaves classicists who view a film like *Troy* with several possibilities of judgment which are less dependent on their expertise but which demand a measure of familiarity with film, its history, and its place in modern culture. But, once divorced from their classical training and methodology, many flounder. At professional colloquia and conferences and in private conversations one hears the tell-all clichés of the modern movie-goer even from the mouths of the educated elite: "It was boring." – "It was too long." – "So-and-So can't act." – "It's not like the book." None of these criticisms is any more useful than to say: "It was not authentic." They reveal more about the spectator than about the spectacle. Boredom is a passive experience of inactivity that comes from disengagement. Finding a film boring usually suggests that the viewer has failed to find the film's approach, voice, intent, rationale, or style. But it is always our task as scholars to understand an artist's intent. An additional misstep is to assume that the director of such a large-scale film is not an artist worthy of serious consideration or, worse, that a director, even one who has a body of work of highly regarded and artistically innovative or challenging films, has now made one that is utterly devoid of any artistic merit. Complaints about the length of a film are often a by-product of boredom. Conversely, the extremely successful *Lord*

of the Rings trilogy not only lasted for nearly nine hours but was also expanded on its DVD releases by several additional hours. William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) ran for nearly four hours but won a record number of Academy Awards and earned back several times its production costs.

As for acting, spectators have unrealistic expectations if they want an actor to portray the Achilles or Hector they have envisioned for themselves when they read the *Iliad*. For some viewers of *Troy*, Brad Pitt and Eric Bana did just that; for others they did not. For the latter group of viewers, Pitt or Bana "can't act." But there is no rational basis for that judgment. The task of the actor attempting to portray a legendary literary character is different from that of the actor who portrays a contemporary or more recent historical person, as when Anthony Hopkins portrays the title character of Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) or Will Smith plays Muhammad Ali in Michael Mann's *Ali* (2001). Both actors were nominated for Academy Awards in the "Best Actor in a Leading Role" category. At the very least, the spectator should attempt to understand the characterization the actor was attempting to create and should also assume that the actor's performance was satisfying to the director. Of course there are film productions so flawed by personality clashes or fundamental artistic misconceptions that the innate problems of the project spill over into its screenplay and performances, but high-profile releases are rarely so.

In most instances the sole narrative requirement of a major Hollywood release based on a work of literature is that the film tell a compelling story, not necessarily the original story and not a story fully appropriate to the text in every detail. A film is not even required to have the same theme as the original, nor should it be. Why not? Film is not only a different medium, it is also a different art form. It has different structural components and methods of organization, there are different economic and time-related production pressures, the end product is usually much sooner viewed than the original is read, and it is received by a very different type of audience and perceived in an emotional rather than an intellectual context. A producer, director, and screenwriter are artists who have worked in film, studied film, thought about film, and then read the original text and reacted to it as commercial artists responsible for an important project; they may also have seen previous film adaptations of their text.[15] They respond to all of this by developing

15 For example, visual motifs from the prelude to the chariot race of Fred Niblo's version of *Ben-Hur* (1925) served as models for the same sequence in Wyler's version. Wyler had been one of Niblo's assistant directors at the chariot race.

their own cinematic version of the text, making their own artistic decisions.

So a far more appropriate response to a film set in antiquity is to examine it with some of the same analytical tools with which one approaches a work of ancient literature. Textual analysis is unnecessary in most instances, at least until the DVD appears with additional footage; at that point there are indeed textual matters to consider. But Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963) that we view today offers only about half of the footage originally shot for what its director had hoped would be two four-hour epics. Various drafts of a script also require textual analysis, but they, too, are only rarely available.[16]

16 I analyze the drafts of *Gladiator* in "*Gladiator* from Screenplay to Screen," in *Gladiator: Film and History*, 1–15.

Troy
From Homer's *Iliad* to Hollywood Epic

Edited by

Martin M. Winkler

Blackwell Publishing

2007