

## Of Marketing and Men: Making the Cinematic Greek Hero, 2010–2014

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The ancient Greeks had their heyday in film from the 1950s to 1981, a period that encompasses the numerous adventures of Hercules in scores of “sword and sandal” movies and the carefully crafted mythological creatures of Ray Harryhausen.<sup>1</sup> While they never really disappeared from the cinema,<sup>2</sup> in the past four years ancient Greek heroes have appeared quite frequently in a number of back-to-back films focused on mythological characters and set in classical antiquity. Most notable among them are Perseus in the remake of *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and its sequel *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), Theseus in *Immortals* (2011), and Hercules in *The Legend of Hercules* (2014) and *Hercules* (2014).

This chapter explores how these recent incarnations of the Greek hero have been constructed and marketed to audiences in two distinct ways: first, as embodying a universal human nature that supposedly extends across time and cultures, and second, as the successors not of earlier Greek heroes on screen but of Maximus from Ridley Scott’s ancient Rome-inspired blockbuster *Gladiator* (2000). Moreover, studios have fashioned the ancient Greek protagonist after the type of everyday male hero that has been populating movie screens at least since *Die Hard* (1988). Multiple media platforms have enabled studios to involve audience members earlier and more interactively in the process of marketing these movies, further advancing the notion that such heroes can be models for anyone.

### Heroes without Borders: The Universality of Greek Myth

While some scholars and film critics have noted the cultural nuances of myth,<sup>3</sup> others have placed universality at the core of Greek myth itself. For instance, Ken Dowden and Niall Livingstone discuss how Greek myth inspired later peoples: “Greek myth, in fact, is universal, and it is in the nature of myth altogether to be universal”; they also describe how Greek myth has “provided a space for meaning, for ideas, for argument that was applicable far beyond the narrow limits of ancestral Greece.”<sup>4</sup> Irene Berti and Marta García Morcillo further note, “The cinematic image of the ancient hero ties in conveniently with the universal model proposed by Greek epics and mythology.”<sup>5</sup>

Marketing campaigns for the theatrical releases (and subsequent DVD releases) of the latest Greeks on screen contain direct references to what is perceived as the enduring and transferrable nature of Greek myth. In advertising *Wrath of the Titans*, for example, director Jonathan Liebesman and actors from the film publicly discussed not just the hero but Greek myth itself in such terms. On the day of the film’s release in the United States, a post on the *Wrath of the Titans* Facebook page invited people to view a Yahoo Movies interview described as “Director Jonathan Liebesman and the cast of *Wrath of the Titans* discuss the universality of Greek mythology, their favorite fight scenes, and which character has the best beard in this Yahoo Movies exclusive.”<sup>6</sup> In response to a question concerning what about these myths “endure[s] retelling and reinterpretation,” Liam Neeson (Zeus in *Wrath*) replied,

Because they speak for all mankind, I think, they speak to every culture in the world. It is essentially the same story when you whittle it down. A young hero is picked to go through a trial of ordeal, having learned something about himself that he brings back to educate the rest of society, and I feel that it taps into all our souls.

Neeson’s remarks recall the archetype of the hero, such as that presented by Joseph Campbell, whose scholarship has been extremely influential on filmmakers.<sup>7</sup> In the same interview, Ralph Fiennes (Hades in *Wrath*) noted the transtemporal quality of myth: “We haven’t changed in thousands of years.” Liebesman added, “The characters are extremely relatable. They are just dysfunctional families who either hate each other, love each other . . . [It’s] exactly like we are today, except there are creatures in these Greek stories—and I think they will endure forever.”

Indeed, Greek myth can be further elided with the rest of what Western societies consider “the ancient world,” without regard for time period or

society. Actor Henry Cavill, who plays Theseus in *Immortals*, said that as a boy he “loved reading those [short stories about Greek myth] and looking at the pictures. That sort of world—Ancient Greece, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome—the tales of warriors and battles and warlords and conquerors and empires . . . all of that.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the difference between Greek, Roman, or Egyptian myths is only of great importance to a spectator who has studied the ancient world; to a general audience it can all be part of one past, a past to which they can relate due to the belief that they are tied to it by their very humanity.

Two apparently divergent examples prove the general rule about the importance of promoting universality in connection with Greek myth. The *Percy Jackson* movies (*Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* [2010] and *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* [2013]) coincide with the aforementioned films inspired by Greek myth, even though they are set in the contemporary United States. Percy (Logan Lerman), patterned after the hero Perseus, has the problems that are typical for a teenager, such as getting along with his mother, fitting in, and making friends. Percy is universal to the extent that, despite his illustrious father Poseidon and demigod status, he has to experience the trials of being a young man. The marketing for the film stresses that even demigods have very human existential struggles: for example, in the trailer for the first film, Percy discusses the difficulties of school with his mother and engages in a rivalry with his new friend Annabeth (Alexandra Daddario), typical activities for a boy his age.

The idea that universal themes or experiences connect peoples across times also facilitates the marketing of a film across borders, by allowing filmmakers to sell one popularized version of antiquity to an international audience. While supposedly Greek heroes clearly manifest some American ideals, increasingly foreign markets are providing Hollywood studios with major profits for their biggest films, perhaps even shaping what movies get made and how they get made.<sup>9</sup> The simpler the storyline and the more spectacular the action, the easier to sell the movie to audiences across cultures.<sup>10</sup> Instead of worrying about cultural specificity, the films can rely on what they present as universal truths, experiences, and emotions to speak to both domestic and international audiences.

### Consuming the Hero: Maximus Revisited

As the interviews connected to the release of *Wrath of the Titans* illustrate, consumer consumption of both the cinematic stories and the characters begins not when viewers enter the movie theater but when they encounter the first interview, film poster, film trailer, Facebook page, or tweet. Thus

the marketing of the film becomes central to the construction of the film's public narrative. Multiple forms of media are used to generate and disseminate a general message about the film and its characters. Through these media, the Greek heroes are initially constructed for the audience, in small sound bites and taglines rather than an elaborate backstory. These short-form media are especially useful for hooking an audience on one idea: not the full story of the movie but rather the most important piece to get the viewer to the theater. Moreover, these marketing pieces best illuminate the connection to *Gladiator*.

Across all media, the majority of recent Greek mythological heroes have been marketed to closely resemble Maximus (Russell Crowe), the protagonist of Ridley Scott's major box-office success *Gladiator* (2000).<sup>11</sup> As the soldier/gladiator/savior of Rome, Maximus revived the ancients on screen for a new generation. Posters and trailers for this film stressed one basic idea, communicated in the movie's tagline: "A Hero Will Rise." Trailers for the film likewise focused on Maximus' struggle to rise from slavery to defeat an empire: the words "The General Who Became a Slave, The Slave Who Became a Gladiator, The Gladiator Who Defied an Empire" flash across a black screen with images of Maximus interspersed throughout. Upon the 2010 release of *Clash of the Titans*, film critic Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* recognized a connection between Maximus and Perseus in her astutely titled review, "Beware of Greeks Bearing Buzzcuts": she notes that Perseus is "the latest big-screen attraction to strap on a sword and sandals to vanquish the box office. (He's Russell Crowe 2.0)."<sup>12</sup> Greek stories are thus presented to the audience through the now-familiar image of the Roman hero on screen, with similar physical image and psychological make-up.

Comparisons start with the treatment of the actors' bodies by the press. Martin Fradley has documented the journalistic focus on the corporeal transformation of Russell Crowe's body into Maximus' fit one, after Crowe gained much weight for a previous role.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the press repeatedly asked Sam Worthington and Henry Cavill about their physical experiences in training for their roles. Henry Cavill commented on how his body helped him to transform into the hero character.<sup>14</sup> The physical appearances of these three male leads bear striking similarities, from the haircut to the type of armor worn during battle scenes. Audiences who have seen one film can use the visual cues provided in another film to connect these ancients on screen.

Film posters also contribute to the visual language of the Maximus-style hero who rises up and dominates his foes with his heroic body, as was the case in the poster images used to promote *Gladiator*. Marketing and film scholar Finola Kerrigan writes about posters and "their ability to

communicate the key essence of a film to the target audience.”<sup>15</sup> Since space is limited on a poster, every single word and image is crucial. Simply by looking at posters, key differences between the representation of Perseus (Harry Hamlin) in the 1981 original *Clash of the Titans* and Perseus in the 2010 remake (Worthington) are evident. Hamlin as Perseus was not represented as a dominating figure. In most posters, he is not even the central figure, but is instead represented by a small image on the right side of the poster, sharing space with his love interest Andromeda. In some versions, the monstrous head of Medusa occupies the focal point; in others, the cast of gods appears at the top.

The posters from the 2010 remake present a very different Perseus. Worthington’s Perseus is often the lone figure on the visual field. If someone or something shares the space, it is a small image of a conquered character, such as Medusa’s severed head. The hero seems to be shouting so powerfully that the snakes on Medusa’s head are thrust away from the hero, representing his triumph. In other posters for the film, Perseus fights various mythological beasts and remains the sole human figure in focus on the poster, leading the audience to believe that the film revolves around this one man.

This depiction of the warrior-hero was perpetuated in similar images on magazine covers around the time of the film’s release. For instance, on the cover of *Empire* magazine, a British film periodical, Worthington’s Perseus gazes directly out at the reader, covered in dirt from the struggle, sword in hand, in full armor.<sup>16</sup> For *Immortals*, individual posters were devoted to different characters in the film. The “Theseus” posters focus on his beleaguered status as one man against seemingly insurmountable odds. In one example, Theseus is shown in the center as a battle rages around him. In another example, Theseus must save the whole world; above his



**Figure 13.1** Perseus (Sam Worthington) looking heroic in *Clash of the Titans* (2010). Legendary Pictures/Warner Bros. Pictures.

head, a caption reads, “The Gods Need a Hero.” Although the marketing campaigns do not try to hide the gods or the connections of the heroes to them, they focus on the relatable parts of the heroes—chiefly the fact that they have to fight—in *Immortals* as well as *Clash of the Titans* and *Wrath of the Titans*.

While posters are a static means of representing the film, movie trailers bring the same story to life with sounds and moving images, and the reach of trailers has spread considerably in recent years.<sup>17</sup> Whereas film trailers were once seen primarily in movie theaters, now anyone with a computer or smartphone and an Internet connection has access to them.<sup>18</sup> As film scholar Lisa Kernan discusses, movie trailers surpass the realm of economics to exist in the artistic realm: “While trailers are a form of advertising, they are also a unique form of narrative film exhibition, wherein promotional discourse and narrative pleasure are conjoined.”<sup>19</sup> In this useful but challenging space, artists must tell the most important piece of their story and attract people to their films.

The trailers for *Clash* and its sequel *Wrath* illustrate their potential power. In the trailer for *Clash of the Titans* (2010), the scene opens in the miserable darkness of Medusa’s lair, then rapidly switches to an image of Perseus bathed in light. The light signals the hero to the audience, even without knowing any mythology or having seen the film. The small number of words spoken highlights their power: “One day, somebody’s gonna have to make a stand; one day, somebody’s gonna have to say ‘enough.’” Directly following these words, Perseus is shown reaching for a sword; that sword remains in his hand throughout the subsequent scenes. In the trailer to the sequel *Wrath of the Titans*, Zeus approaches Perseus and asks for his help. He explains to Perseus that it is his humanity that will save the world and make him more powerful than a god. At the end of this trailer, the viewer is invited into Perseus’ world. As he fights, the words FEEL THE WRATH (in capital letters) flash across the screen one at a time, putting the audience in Perseus’ place and inviting them to become the hero.

Likewise, in the trailer for *Immortals*, the audience is led to believe that only one man can win the fight. Theseus is presented here as not merely an underdog but the underdog who fights for freedom. As with the narratives in the trailers for *Clash* and *Wrath*, the notion of the savior is foregrounded; the words “Even the gods will need a hero” flash across the screen. In the first trailer released for this film, there is yet another shadow of *Gladiator*’s Maximus. Theseus’ rallying cry to his men—“Fight for your children, fight for honor, fight for your future, fight for immortality”—recalls Maximus rallying his troops in one of the early scenes of *Gladiator*. Maximus exhorts his troops by making them think both of the possibility of going home and of their immortal fame: “Three weeks from now, I will be harvesting my

crops. Imagine where you will be and it will be so. Hold the line. Stay with me. If you find yourself alone and riding in green fields with the sun on your face, do not be troubled, for you are in Elysium and you are already dead. Brothers, what we do in life echoes in eternity.” There is also an echo of Brad Pitt’s Achilles in *Troy* (2004), addressing his men before storming the beach of Troy: “You know what’s there, waiting beyond that beach. Immortality, take it, it’s yours.” The recent Hercules movies also make connections to *Gladiator*. In the trailer for *The Legend of Hercules*, the presentation of Hercules in a gladiatorial-style arena clearly recalls Maximus; words on the screen note that “before he was a god, he was an ordinary man.”<sup>20</sup>

The most popular delivery system for such trailers, the Internet, has drastically changed marketing and become perhaps its most useful tool. Filmmakers can create campaigns that have the ability to “go viral” and enable the potential audience to participate well before going to the movie theater. Instead of a one-way feed of information from the film studio to the audience, as with a poster or trailer, the Internet opens up a space for the exchange of ideas or emotions using various social media platforms.

The *Clash of the Titans* Facebook page provides a good example of the marketing of the most recent Greek heroes. Facebook connects Perseus to other action figures, specifically in this case to Sam Worthington’s role in the film *Terminator Salvation* (2009): “Perseus isn’t the only hero that has saved the world from epic destruction. Relive Sam Worthington’s role as a futuristic cyborg in *Terminator Salvation* - available now in The Terminator Anthology.”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere the feed delivers numerous images of Worthington and invites readers to imagine themselves as part of Greek myth, with questions and exhortations such as “If you could be any Greek god, who would you choose to be?” and “This weekend, take an epic journey to the depths of hell with some of the fiercest gods and monsters known to man.” The Facebook page for *Immortals* was even more interactive, before both the movie release and the DVD release. In one example, readers were asked to dress as their favorite immortal and post a photo on the wall. Another asked them to submit photos of their abdominal muscles in order to compete for merchandise.<sup>22</sup> Facebook, through which users connect with friends, can connect them just as easily to characters in movies. By giving them the opportunity to participate virtually, the users hopefully become viewers invested in these characters.

### Pop-Culture Heroes

These newest Greek heroes fit into popular culture beyond the example of Maximus, the paradigm of the hero for “ancient world” films from the year 2000 onward. These Greek heroes also resonate with examples of a

hero who is an ordinary guy but ready to be courageous and save the day at great risk to his own personal safety. A prominent example in American movies comes from the *Die Hard* franchise (1988–2013), in which John McClain (Bruce Willis) was introduced as a New York City police officer on vacation in Los Angeles who saves his ex-wife and her colleagues when terrorists storm their Christmas party. This figure continues to appear in movies such as *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013), in which a disgraced former Secret Service agent (Gerard Butler) who happens to be on a tour of the White House saves the President of the United States, the President's son, and millions of people from an army of terrorists.

These movie heroes are “regular guys.” Viewers have become accustomed to seeing the average guy on screen rising up to save society, and the newest “Greek hero” characters fit in well with a broader cinematic and cultural presentation of hero figures who start out like anyone else. These mythological films were released around the same time as a spate of American superhero films, including *Iron Man* (2008; sequel in 2010), *The Amazing Spiderman* (2012), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). A brief exchange in *The Dark Knight Rises* encapsulates the current popular attitude toward onscreen heroes. When told that the people should know the name of their savior, Batman disagrees, replying, “A hero can be anyone.”

Of course, none of the examples above are really just ordinary people. They are typically people with advantages, whether elite training, money, or a special skill. Yet each of them is depicted as an ordinary man fighting against the odds and overcoming them. The audience is asked to look beyond these special skills and advantages and to identify with the act of rising up against the odds. This valorization of the average person in popular culture extended even to the leader of the free world: in the 2004 election for the President of the United States, voters were polled about the presidential candidate with whom they would prefer to share a beer.<sup>23</sup>

Given the goals of broad marketing campaigns and the wide distribution of these films, not only the heroes but also the actors who play them benefit from being perceived as accessible and likable, in line with the prevailing cultural dictum that anyone can achieve anything. Press and marketing teams have long encouraged this notion by connecting the audience with the actors' personal lives. The “star system” by which a film's actors are used to sell the film is a typical part of the marketing of Hollywood films.<sup>24</sup> As Paul Watson notes, the “star's commercial capacity is inextricably bound up with his or her ability ‘to be liked’ by large numbers of people from a range of cultural and national contexts.”<sup>25</sup> This mingling of actor and character identities can spill over into how people view the onscreen persona. Thus the audience may connect more deeply to the characters,



bridging the distance between the fantasy world of gods and heroes and the real lives of the spectators.

For example, interviews with Worthington (Perseus in *Clash of the Titans* and *Wrath of the Titans*) detail his working-class upbringing and the fact that he did not intend to be an actor, creating an access point for identification by a similar audience. Instead of stories about celebrity lifestyle, he tells of working as a laborer as a teenager, laying bricks.<sup>26</sup> The suggestion is that, like his character Perseus, he also had to struggle. Worthington also stated, “Perseus is the guy I wish I was, the brave guy that will fight anything for his family, will take on any peril.”<sup>27</sup> Perseus therefore becomes not just someone who can pull himself up in adverse circumstances but the ideal man who places family first. He notes in another interview that the hero is just one of the ordinary guys: “A hero isn’t someone who leads men; a hero is someone that’s in the trench with the men.”<sup>28</sup> Interviews with the actors provide specific vehicles by which the audience can relate to the larger-than-life heroes of myth.

The image of the ordinary man who is an extraordinary warrior has extended beyond the space of the movie proper while staying on screen. In 2007, the Army National Guard began advertising in movie theaters during the previews and other advertisements that precede the feature film, using a music video for recruitment purposes. The video is entitled “Citizen/Soldier” and stresses the role of the soldier depicted as the average man who changes the course of history.<sup>29</sup> As the group 3 Doors Down sings the video’s eponymous song, words such as “Soldier,” “I’ll Be There to Help,” “I Will Never Accept Defeat,” and “I Will Never Quit” flash in the bottom right corner of the screen to support the lyrics. At the end of the video, the web address for the National Guard appears.

The heroes of Hollywood all seem to be similar, whether in the dress of an ancient Greek or Roman or the everyday clothes of a modern man. It should not be surprising, then, that they are marketed in the same ways, as having the same characteristics: ordinary men rising successfully to the challenge of fighting against the odds. As marketing tactics have changed to reflect new technologies and cultural shifts, reaching out to the general audience of “ordinary men” has become easier than ever. Now filmmakers can convince the audience that Greek heroes are just like them and that they, therefore, can achieve the same extraordinary things.

## Notes

1. For instance, Steve Reeves in the title role as *Hercules* (1958) and again in *Hercules Unchained* (1959). Ray Harryhausen was the creator of a special effects stop-motion animation called Dynamation and was responsible for the

- mythological creatures in films such as *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *Clash of the Titans* (1981). On Harryhausen, see Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 129–34; Solomon (2001) 113–18.
2. Post-1981 examples, both mythological and “historical,” include Disney’s animated *Hercules* (1997), *Troy* (2004), *Alexander* (2004), and *300* (2006). On television: *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999).
  3. For instance, see Graf (1993) 55 for a summary of the question of universality: “The view of myths as bound to specific cultures raises the question whether myths really are universal as mythologists, from the early eighteenth century onward, have supposed.”
  4. See Dowden and Livingstone (2011) 17.
  5. Berti and Morcillo (2008) 14.
  6. The Facebook post ([www.facebook.com/wrathofthetitans](http://www.facebook.com/wrathofthetitans)) on March 30, 2012, directed fans to Yahoo Movies ([movies.yahoo.com](http://movies.yahoo.com)) to view the video “Insider Access: Wrath of the Titans.” All quotes from online content, including interviews, are my own transcriptions.
  7. Campbell (1949). On the hero’s journey and its benefits to screenwriters, see Indick (2004). In another interview, Neeson equates mythology with Westerns: “As far as influences go, I’d say it was Westerns and Greek mythology—it’s all the same story, you know,” as quoted in Dittman (2012).
  8. Quoted in Gross (2012).
  9. Savage (2013).
  10. Brook (2013).
  11. On this film, see especially Cyrino (2005) 207–56 and Winkler (2004).
  12. Dargis (2010).
  13. Fradley (2004) 243.
  14. See Gross (2012). This interview asks questions about both Cavill’s role as Theseus and his role as Superman in *Man of Steel* (2013). On Worthington, see Andrews (2011); also the YouTube behind-the-scenes featurette “Sam Worthington: An Action Hero for the Ages” (October 18, 2013).
  15. Kerrigan (2010) 129–30. Of course there are other issues at stake as well, such as the billing of actors and directors on the poster.
  16. See the images at O’Hara (2009).
  17. Kerrigan (2010) 130.
  18. On the “mobile trailer,” see Johnston (2009) 124–52.
  19. Kernan (2004) 1.
  20. While not all recent ancient-world films focus on mythology, there seems to be a constant connection to *Gladiator*. On the connection between *Gladiator* and *Pompeii* (2014), see Merry (2014) and Paul (2014).
  21. Facebook posts from late summer 2012 ([www.facebook.com/clashofthetitans](http://www.facebook.com/clashofthetitans)).
  22. Interactive posts ([www.facebook.com/immortals](http://www.facebook.com/immortals)). See also Kessler (2011).
  23. See Benedetto (2004) and Nagorski (2008).
  24. On the star system in Hollywood, see McDonald (2000) and also Watson (2012).
  25. Watson (2012) 169.

26. See Miles (2010).
27. Quoted in the YouTube interview with BlackTree Media, "Sam Worthington: Perseus is the guy I wish I was" (March 29, 2012).
28. O'Hara (2009).
29. The video "3 Doors Down: Citizen/Soldier" can be viewed on YouTube. Thanks to the audience at the 2012 Film and History Conference in Milwaukee for bringing this point to my attention.