

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Trojan War on the Screen: An Annotated Filmography

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The first part of this filmography traces the chronology of big-screen adaptations of the Trojan War myth and briefly comments on individual films. Like Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*, these films are not faithful adaptations of Homer but are based on or "inspired" by the *Iliad* and, in most cases, by Book 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the most famous and influential ancient account of the fall of Troy. Films adapting Homer's *Odyssey* are not included here except where a brief reference is appropriate. Such films also tend to show or at least refer to the city's fall, mainly because the end of the Trojan War provides a convenient point of departure for the story of Odysseus' return and because filmmakers understandably cannot resist showing off the Trojan Horse.

The filmography's second part lists some noteworthy television productions or series episodes. Part 3 samples some oddities and otherwise amusing or remarkable items to indicate the variety that references to ancient myth can take on large and small screens. This part is by no means comprehensive; it is intended to whet readers' appetites to look for additional items on their own. Annotations in all three parts occasionally reveal the writer's preferences.

The listings exclude filmed or taped adaptations of classic stage plays on Trojan-War themes like Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Jean Racine's *Hermione*, Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea*, or Jean Giraudoux's *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*. It also omits films with modern settings

that contain names of mythical characters in their titles or plots. Television documentaries, which often contain film excerpts or staged scenes, are excluded as well.

Not all of the silent films listed survive or are accessible. Reliable information can be scarce or non-existent, and sources may contradict each other concerning credits, running times, and release dates. The same is true for some of the sound films. The Italian epics of the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, were often retitled and recut (usually shortened) for export to the United States or for broadcasts on commercial American television. Many of them are available today only in poorly dubbed videos of bad to atrocious quality. Their colors are faded, their images scratched or jumpy, and their widescreen compositions (in a 2.35:1 or similar aspect ratio) ruined by panning and scanning (1.33:1) for 16mm transfers, the basis of television broadcasts. A considerable part of their low standing among film critics and classicists is due to the fact that these films rarely if ever can be watched in the way they were intended to be watched.

In the present listings credits have been omitted except for the names of directors, given for purposes of identification, and brief discussions of actors when warranted. Information about credits, plots, or both is available from various sources. The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) is the most extensive and usually reliable electronic film guide. The following books also provide first orientations:

- De España, Rafael. *El Peplum: La antigüedad en el cine*. Barcelona: Glénat, 1998.
- Elley, Derek. *The Epic Film: Myth and History*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.
- Lucanio, Patrick. *With Fire and Sword: Italian Spectacles on American Screens 1958–1968*. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1994.
- Le péplum: L'antiquité au cinéma*. Ed. Claude Aziza. CinémaAction 89. Condé-sur-Noireau: Corlet/Télérama, 1998.
- Sinmythologia: Oi ellênikoi mythoi ston pankosmio kinématografo*. Ed. Michalis Dēmopoulos. Athens: Politistikē Olympiada, 2003.
- Smith, Gary A. *Epic Films: Casts, Credits and Commentary on Over 250 Historical Spectacle Movies*. Jefferson: McFarland, 1991.
- Solomon, Jon. *The Ancient World in the Cinema*. 2nd edn. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

1. Cinema

1902

Le jugement de Paris (The Judgment of Paris)

France. Director: Georges Hatot. Hatot worked with Louis Lumière and made short films on biblical topics. His *Néron essayant des poisons sur un esclave* ("Nero Trying Out Poisons on a Slave," 1896) was the earliest film about the cinema's favorite Roman emperor.

1908

La caduta di Troia (The Fall of Troy)

Italy. Director: Luigi Maggi. Maggi was one of the pioneers of epic films set in antiquity. He is best known today for *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeii* (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1908) and *Nerone (Nero, or The Burning of Rome; also known as Nero, or the Fall of Rome; 1909)*.

1910–1911

La caduta di Troia (The Fall of Troy)

Italy. Directors: Giovanni Pastrone (under the pseudonym Piero Fosco) and Romano Luigi Borgnetto. The first important film on its subject, with a running time of *c.* 35 minutes. Pastrone later wrote and directed *Cabiria* (1914), one of the most spectacular, famous, and influential epics in film history, set during the Second Punic War.

1924

Helena. Part 1: Der Raub der Helena ("The Rape of Helen"); Part 2: *Der Untergang Trojas* ("The Fall of Troy").

Germany. Director: Manfred Noa. Long-lost monumental epic made at the height of German silent film production but overshadowed by Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (also in two parts). With a cast of thousands, Noa filmed in Bavaria on a scale rivaling that of the historical epics made at the Ufa studios in Berlin. His gigantic set of Troy was said to have been built so sturdily that it could withstand even storm winds. Spectacular highlights were a chariot race, Helen's welcome to Troy, land and sea battles, a still impressive Trojan Horse, and a huge conflagration. The film was restored in 2001 to a length of 204 minutes.

1927

The Private Life of Helen of Troy (Helen of Troy)

U.S. Director: Alexander Korda. British (originally Hungarian) producer-director Korda's attempt to set foot in Hollywood around the time of the transition from silent to sound films. Two-thirds of its footage are lost. The screenplay was based on John Erskine's 1925 novel of the same name and resembles some of the witty drawing-room comedies of the 1920s (despite the presence of a character with the forcedly unfunny name of Malapokitoratoreadetos). At the end, Helen tries out her wiles even on Ulysses. Korda gave the title part to his wife, actress Maria Corda. Korda later made *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) and *Rembrandt* (1936), both famous and accomplished films which provide us with examples of his "upstairs-downstairs" perspective on history. In 1937 he began production of *I, Claudius* with director Josef von Sternberg and with Charles Laughton as Claudius, but the film was never completed.

1931

La regina di Sparta (The Queen of Sparta)

U.S./Italy. Director: Manfred S. Noa. This low-budget 80-minute miniepic produced in Hollywood for an Italian company amazes by its free-wheeling approach to plot material from the *Iliad*. The dysfunctional family relations among Priam, Paris, and Helen are in a class of their own. Classical scholars who tear their hair over *Troy* should take a look at this film.

1953–1954

Loves of Three Queens (The Love of Three Queens, Eternal Woman, The Face That Launched a Thousand Ships)

France/Italy. Directors: Marc Allegret and Edgar G. Ulmer. Screen siren Hedy Lamarr, who had been the first film actress to appear in a nude scene (in Gustav Machaty's *Éxtase* of 1932) and who had played the titular seductress in Cecil B. De Mille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949), produced this star vehicle for herself. She plays a modern woman who is undecided about what costume to wear to a ball and asks three men for advice. They suggest Helen of Troy, Empress Josephine, and Geneviève of Brabant. The film had a complicated and ill-fated production history; it is said to have been originally over three hours long (and unfinished).

In the classical episode, Venus and Jupiter make appropriate onscreen appearances. Ulmer later directed *Hannibal* (1960).

1956

Helen of Troy

U.S. Director: Robert Wise. The chief model for *Troy* almost four decades later and produced by the same studio, this was the first widescreen epic on the Trojan War. It was advertised on *Behind the Cameras*, the studio's television series to promote upcoming releases, as both archaeologically sound and reverent of Homer's *Iliad* ("this book was our challenge"). It is, however, a rather impersonal effort on the part of director Wise. The cast of famous British, French, Italian, and American actors appears a bit lost in the sets. This is most obviously the case for the Helen of twenty-one-year old Rossana Podestà, who did not speak English. Wise chose her over Elizabeth Taylor, Ava Gardner, and Lana Turner. Podestà had played Nausicaa in Mario Camerini's *Ulisse (Ulysses)* the year before. That same year she had given an excellent performance in Valerio Zurlini's *Le ragazze di San Frediano (The Girls of San Frediano)*. Neither Podestà nor Jacques Sernas as Paris – billed as "Jack Sernas," presumably to make his first name more easily pronounceable to American audiences – nor the overall persuasiveness of the film were helped by the presence of a pre-stardom Brigitte Bardot as Helen's handmaid. (Perhaps if Bardot had played Helen . . .) But the city of Troy, closely patterned on the palace at Knossos on Crete, looks impressive. Wise was assisted on some of the mass scenes and action sequences by one experienced and one future director, Raoul Walsh and Sergio Leone, both uncredited.

1957

The Story of Mankind

U.S. Director: Irwin Allen. The future "master of disaster" here produced, directed, and co-wrote a different kind of disaster: an all-star episodic history of mankind based on the best-selling novel by Hendrik Willem Van Loon. Ronald Colman in his final role is the Spirit of Man who fights the devil (Vincent Price) for the survival of mankind before a heavenly tribunal. Classical antiquity is represented by Hippocrates (a fatherly Charles Coburn), Caesar, Cleopatra (Virginia Mayo!), Nero (Peter Lorre!), and, of course, Helen of Troy (glamor starlet Dani Crayne; Hedy Lamarr this time around is Joan of Arc). Footage from Wise's *Helen of Troy* and Howard Hawks's *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955) is used to give

the film a modicum of visual appeal. French filmmaker Georges Méliès had long before pioneered this approach to history with *La civilisation à travers les âges* ("Civilization across the Ages," 1908).

1962

La guerra di Troia (The Trojan War, The Trojan Horse, The Wooden Horse of Troy, The Mighty Warrior)

Italy/France. Director: Giorgio Ferroni. Loosely based on the *Aeneid*, this film is one of the better Italian muscleman epics set in antiquity. Its hero is Aeneas, played by Steve Reeves; its theme the end of the Trojan War and the surviving Trojans' escape to Italy. In *Troy*, Aeneas' is the voice of reason against a reckless Paris. Ferroni's style, especially his handling of the widescreen format, overcomes obvious plot limitations. The scene of the Trojan Horse being dragged across the plain toward Troy and entering the city is superior to Wise's. American bodybuilder Reeves is most famous for having been Hercules in Pietro Francisci's *Le fatiche di Ercole (Hercules, The Adventures of Hercules; 1958)* and *Ercole e la regina di Lidia (Hercules Unchained, Hercules and the Queen of Lydia; 1959)*. Ferroni previously made *Le Baccanti (The Bacchantes, 1961)*, an epic based on Euripides' tragedy, and directed two quasi-historical Roman films in 1964. Cf. also below.

1962

L'ira di Achille (Fury of Achilles, Achilles)

Italy. Director: Marino Girolami. This unusual film reveals a greater familiarity with the *Iliad* than all other films, opening with shots of the famous ancient marble bust of Homer while a narrator introduces the story. The plot is set in motion when the Greeks capture Chryseis, Briseis, and an invented Xenia (added as soon-to-be lover of Patroclus). A number of famous scenes from the *Iliad* duly appear on screen, if in condensed form: the plague sent by Apollo, the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles (with Athena momentarily appearing to the latter), Thetis' epiphany to Achilles, the forge of Hephaestus (Achilles' divine armor is golden; his shield, however, does not display scenic decorations and is not round), and Hector's farewell from his family (and the Trojans). Priam's visit to Achilles contains a surprising twist. As does the *Iliad*, the film excludes Achilles' death and the fall of Troy. More surprisingly, there is no Helen. American bodybuilder Gordon Mitchell, although too old for the part, is a gaunt Achilles, a doomed dealer of death fully aware

of his own end. The interiors of Troy sport Minoan columns, but the exteriors with their crenellated towers and walls look quasi-medieval.

1965

Il leone di Tebe (The Lion of Thebes; Helen, Queen of Troy)

Italy/France. Director: Giorgio Ferroni. Musclemans epic that takes Euripides' tragedy *Helen* as its starting point. After the Trojan War, Helen and Menelaus are returning to Sparta, but a shipwreck off the Egyptian coast separates them. Helen and the eponymous hero, her faithful defender, are brought to the pharaoh's court. Since Helen is played by Yvonne Furneaux, it is understandable that the pharaoh is instantly smitten with her. Various palace intrigues ensue, but Helen's bodyguard saves the day.

1972

The Trojan Women

Greece/United Kingdom/U.S. Director: Michael Cacoyannis. Second of three adaptations of Euripidean tragedy by a distinguished Greek writer-director, with an international cast of famous actresses. Irene Papas stands out as a fearless and smart Helen who also radiates a mature eroticism (and knows it). Cacoyannis found the location for Troy after the fall in the ruins of a walled city in Spain, minimally dressed with pillars to evoke classical antiquity. He had previously filmed *Electra* (1962), with Irene Papas in the title role, and would complete his trilogy in 1977.

1973

Elena sì, ma . . . di Troia (Helen, Yes . . . Helen of Troy)

Italy. Director: Alfonso Brescia. An erotic parody of the myth, with a former Miss Austria in the title role and footage from Ferroni's *La guerra di Troia*. Brescia later directed three other ancient epics, among which *La rivolta dei pretoriani (Revolt of the Praetorians, 1964)* is the only big-screen spectacle set at the time of Emperor Domitian.

1977

Iphigenia

Greece. Director: Michael Cacoyannis. Adapted from *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Cacoyannis's third film of Euripides is the culmination of film adaptations

of Greek tragedy in the realistic mode. Irene Papas as Clytemnestra and a young Tatiana Papamoschou in the title role are stand-outs in a uniformly accomplished cast. The memorable score is by Mikis Theodorakis, who had also written the music for Cacoyannis's earlier adaptations.

1996

Achilles

United Kingdom. Director: Barry Purves. In eleven minutes, this "Claymation" (i.e., clay animation) short narrated by Derek Jacobi tells the homoerotic love story of Achilles and Patroclus during the Trojan War and the deaths of both. Their love is not in the *Iliad* but is first attested for Aeschylus' lost trilogy about Achilles (*The Myrmidons, The Nereids, and The Phrygians or Hector's Ransom*).

2004

Troy

U.S. Director: Wolfgang Petersen. The most expensive and longest Trojan-War epic made to date, unlikely to be rivaled in the foreseeable future. Many of its strengths are not obvious on a first viewing; some of its weaknesses are. The wooden horse is almost too beautiful to be menacing or mysterious.

2004

Singe den Zorn ("Sing the Wrath")

Germany. Directors: Matthias Merkle and Antje Borchardt. A dramatic staging of the *Iliad* in 96 minutes. In the ruins of Troy at Hisarlık, a cast of fourteen recites and enacts about 4,000 lines of Homer in the translation by Johann Heinrich Voss, the best-known German version.

2. Television

1953

"The Fall of Troy (1184 B.C.)"

U.S. Director: Sidney Lumet. Episode in series *You Are There*, a half-hour program on great moments in history presented in the manner of live news broadcasts and hosted by Walter Cronkite. Lumet also directed the episode "The Return of Ulysses" the following year. Other episodes

involving classical antiquity dealt with the deaths of Socrates, Caesar, and Cleopatra.

1955

“The Iliad”

U.S. Adaptation for series *Omnibus*, a cultural production hosted by Alastair Cooke. Other episodes on classical themes dealt with Salome and Brutus. An adaptation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, featuring Christopher Plummer, aired in 1957.

1965

“The Myth Makers”

United Kingdom. Director: Michael Leeston-Smith. Episode in cult series *Doctor Who*, in which the eponymous doctor and his crew time-travel to the Trojan War. “Having initially dismissed the famous wooden horse as a fiction of Homer’s, the Doctor is eventually driven to ‘invent’ it himself, thereby giving the Greeks the means to defeat the Trojans” (BBC website). “The Romans,” another classical episode from the same year, is set during the time of Nero.

1966

“The Revenge of the Gods”

U.S. Director: Sobey Martin. Episode in short-lived science-fiction series *The Time Tunnel*, in which two modern scientists are deposited at various moments of history when the eponymous machine malfunctions. Here they land in the Greek camp during the last year of the Trojan War and are promptly mistaken for gods. To emphasize the wooden horse, the script makes Ulysses, not Agamemnon or Achilles, the most prominent among the Greek leaders. But at least Epeius, the craftsman who built the horse, receives a screen appearance. Footage from Wise’s *Helen of Troy* and Rudolf Maté’s *The 300 Spartans* (1962) cannot prevent another disaster perpetrated by producer Irwin Allen.

1967

Le Troiane (“The Trojan Women”)

Italy. Director: Vittorio Cottafavi. One of Cottafavi’s highly acclaimed adaptations of Greek tragedy for Italian public television. Cottafavi had

previously directed several quasi-ancient mythological and historical films, among them *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* (*Hercules Conquers Atlantis, Hercules and the Captive Women*; 1961), regarded by cinema cognoscenti as the best of all muscleman epics.

1971

L'Eneide (“The Aeneid”)

Italy/Yugoslavia. Director: Franco Rossi. Rossi’s follow-up to his *Odissea* of 1968. This six-hour version of Virgil’s epic for public television is the only screen adaptation worthy of serious consideration vis-à-vis its model. The most memorable performance is by Greek actress and singer Olga Karlatos as Dido, queen of Carthage, to whom Aeneas recounts the fall of Troy. The discovery of the Trojan Horse in Rossi’s *Odissea* is, however, a more accomplished sequence and boasts the screen’s eeriest wooden horse ever.

1979

“Of Mycenae and Men”

United Kingdom. Director: Hugh David. Half-hour comic oddity, written by Frederick Raphael and Kenneth Macleish, on “what might have happened to Helen of Troy after the Trojan War” (BBC website). Curvaceous Diana Dors plays Helen; Freddie Jones is Menelaus, and Bob Hoskins is Mr. Taramasalatopoulos.

1995

“Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts”

U.S. Director: T. J. Scott. Episode in series *Xena, Warrior Princess*. The eponymous lady and her sidekick take part in the Trojan War to help Xena’s friend Helen. The Trojan Horse, here made of bamboo, plays a large part in the plot. In a later episode called “Ulysses,” Xena encounters and falls in love with an Ithaca-bound Odysseus. (The episode’s German title translates as “What Homer Could Not Know.” Quite so.) Originally a character in the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, Xena became an equally successful series heroine, traversing space and time from pre-Trojan War Greek myth down to Roman history and on to Norse mythology – all without aging, of course.

1997

Crayola Kids Adventures: The Trojan Horse

Canada/U.S. Director: Michael Kruzan. Songs and slapstick humor liven up this retelling of the Trojan War story from the Judgment of Paris to the fall of Troy. Intended for children ages 7–11. The cast are children wielding toy weapons.

1999

Hercules: Zero to Hero

U.S. Director: Bob Kline. Animated direct-to-video sequel to Disney's theatrical release *Hercules* of the same year. Helen of Troy is just one of the characters from Greek myth that are brought into the story of Hercules, although their mythology is unconnected with his.

2003

Helen of Troy

U.S. Director: John Kent Harrison. Three-hour television epic that profited from the anticipated theatrical release of *Troy*. Unusually, it features Theseus of Athens as a major character in the story of Helen before the Trojan War. Achilles, by contrast, is a minor character, most notable for being the kind of “brute” that Petersen’s Achilles turns out not to be. (Harrison’s Achilles sets up Hector for a treacherous kill.) Agamemnon is murdered in his bath by a Clytemnestra who unexpectedly appears in Troy after its fall.

3. Miscellanea

1913

König Menelaus im Kino (“King Menelaus at the Movies”)

Austria. Director: Hans Otto Löwenstein. A parody in which the director plays Helen of Troy.

1937

Nothing Sacred

U.S. Director: William A. Wellman. Classic screwball comedy that briefly features famous women from myth and history: Helen of Troy, Salome,

Lady Godiva, and Catherine the Great. The last-mentioned is played by one Elinor Troy.

1951

Sköna Helena (*Helen of Troy*)

Sweden. Director: Gustaf Edgren. Operetta after Jacques Offenbach’s *La belle Hélène*. Eva Dahlbeck, best known internationally for her work with Ingmar Bergman, plays the title role.

1960

La regina delle Amazzoni (*Love Slaves of the Amazons, Queen of the Amazons, Colossus and the Amazons, Colossus and the Amazon Queen*)

Italy. Director: Vittorio Sala. Glaucus, the strongest Greek after the Trojan War, and his friend Pyrrhus are engaged in adventures among the Amazons. The film is one of many examples of how loosely the plots of muscleman films may be related to Greek myth.

1961

The Three Stooges Meet Hercules

U.S. Director: Edward Bernds. At the height of the sword-and-sandal films, the eponymous trio put in their two drachmas’ worth of parody by time-traveling to tenth-century-B.C. Ithaca and meeting assorted mythical characters. These include Ajax, Ulysses, Achilles, and Helen. No relation to actual myth is intended. The humor is for aficionados only.

1962

La leggenda di Enea (*War of the Trojans, The Avenger, Legend of Aeneas, The Last Glory of Troy, Conquering Heroes*)

Italy/France. Director: Giorgio Rivalta. In a condensation of the second half of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Aeneas, again played by Steve Reeves, fights over a new homestead in Italy for the survivors of the Trojan War. The film is a sequel to Ferroni’s *La guerra di Troia*, footage of which is used when Aeneas remembers the fall of Troy. His reminiscence is prompted when he sees wall paintings of the fall, a very loose adaptation of a famous moment in Book 2 of the *Aeneid*.

1967

Doctor Faustus

United Kingdom. Directors: Richard Burton and Nevill Coghill. Adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus*, with Burton as Faustus and Elizabeth Taylor, the star of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* four years earlier, as Helen of Troy. The Faust legend has been filmed numerous times.

1968

"Elaan of Troyius"

U.S. Director: John Meredyth Lucas. Episode in the original *Star Trek* series, whose plot is somewhat patterned after the origin of the Trojan War, as the pseudo-Greek names indicate. The eponymous lady belongs to the nobility of the planet Elas, which has been engaged in wars against the planet Troyius for centuries. To ensure peace, she is given to the leader of Troyius as a bride but proves destructive. Another occasionally Helen-like character is the half-human and half-alien Deanna Troi in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, who in the episode "Ménage à Troi" is abducted and who appears in pseudo-ancient garb in "Hollow Pursuits" (both 1990).

1981

Der Schatz des Priamos ("The Treasure of Priam")

West Germany. Director: Karl Fruchtmann. Three-hour television biography of Heinrich Schliemann.

1981

Das Liebeskonzil ("Council of Love")

Austria. Director: Werner Schroeter. Film version by independent filmmaker Schroeter, based on the controversial play by Oskar Panizza and his blasphemy trial and imprisonment in 1895. Helen, Salome, and Agrippina as well as Mary and Jesus are among the play's and film's ancient characters. The subject is syphilis; the attack is on religious hypocrisy. Schroeter's adaptation had to battle courts and censors.

1996

Hamlet

Director: Kenneth Branagh. Act II, Scene 2 of the play contains a recital of Achilles' son Pyrrhus slaughtering Priam. Branagh's full-text adaptation contains a visual enactment, with John Gielgud as Priam and Judi Dench as Hecuba.

2001

The Pharaoh Project

U.S. Director: Brad Tanenbaum. Science-fiction adventure in which modern characters bear names that evoke figures from various periods of history, including Ramses, Alexander the Great, and Genghis Khan. The modern Helen Trajen parallels, of course, Helen of Troy. For addicts only.

2004

The Trojan Women

U.S. Director: Brad Mays. Adaptation of Euripides' tragedy by a stage director with a modern twist: the story is presented as if for television news, complete with a newscaster and on-scene reporter. Mays had adapted Euripides' *Bacchae* to film in 2001.

Troy
From Homer's *Iliad* to
Hollywood Epic

Edited by

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