chapter 9

The Fall of Troy: Intertextual Presences in Wolfgang Petersen’s Film

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Wolfgang Petersen’s filmic version of the Trojan War and the fall of Troy is likely to be the most popular point of reference for at least a generation, considering that those who consume audiovisual materials nowadays are far more numerous than those who study classical texts and know firsthand the myths that form the basis of our culture. A talented director, an exciting story, and a spectacular cast have made Achilles’ image inseparable for many from that of dashing Brad Pitt, just as Hector has become associated with responsible and reliable Eric Bana. Criticized by purists and scholars at first, Troy deserves serious attention because of its immense popular success, its intrinsic cinematic quality, and its ability to revive worldwide interest in a topic that, by and large, had been buried in dusty libraries. 1 The first collection of essays on the film appeared three years after its première.2 The contributions to that volume analyzed sources of Troy, suggested comparative parallels, and identified precursors, both filmic and literary. My contribution here continues in that vein, as I propose to study the audiovisual narrative of the fall of Troy in Petersen’s film by focusing on two types of sources, literary texts familiar to academic audiences and cinematographic titles from popular and mass culture. Concerning the former, I will concentrate on Book 2 of Virgil’s Aeneid. Though mentioned as a source in the earlier collection of essays, no detailed analysis of this connection exists. As for the latter, I will highlight connections to several earlier films, even if some of them are not related to the Trojan myth.

I approach the study of these sources as part of a dynamic process by which the classical tradition renews itself not through the repetition of well-known, untouchable canonical texts, but through the perpetual transformation and

1 However, as Jonathan S. Burgess, “Achilles’ Heel: The Historicism of the Film Troy,” in Kostas Myrsiades, (ed.), Reading Homer: Film and Text (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 163–185, reports at 178 note 6: “I have found undergraduate students to be the harshest critics of Troy; recent initiates can be the fiercest guardians of antiquity.”—I would like to thank Prof. Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez for the English translation of this chapter.
adaption of earlier materials. In the case of popular culture, the reception and transformation of classical elements is not always the result of conscious borrowing. I will first analyze the concept of the classical tradition, paying special attention to the ways in which it travels across generations and to the role that popular culture plays in its transformation. Next, I turn to Virgil's account of the fall of Troy and its possible impact on *Troy*. Here I will devote some time to consider the importance of visual sources for a culture like ours, one that is largely audiovisual; the capacity of cinema to generate complex interconnections based on the image; and the active role of the audience in creating new meanings. Finally, I will review certain probable cinematic sources for *Troy*, including likely influences such as films based on the story of the Trojan War and some successful epic and adventure films released just before Petersen's blockbuster, whose influence had not been considered in the earlier volume of essays on *Troy*.

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**Classical Tradition and Popular Culture**

The expression “classical tradition” does not primarily refer to elements of modern culture that originated in Greece or Rome but rather to the process by which they have reached us. The Latin noun *traditio* conveys action or process. It derives from the verb *tradere* in the sense of “transmitting from hand to hand or from generation to generation.” In consequence, when we speak of the classical tradition it is important for us to take into account the process of transmission as much as the contents transmitted. We commonly refer to the classical tradition as if it were a torch that passes from hand to hand. While the torch in this metaphor remains the same, the materials transmitted are subject to continuous transformation. In that sense, a better image might be the ingestion of food. In this process, the flavors of the foods we consume linger for a while in our mouths, while the nutriments are broken down in our system and, mixed with other foodstuff, are eventually absorbed into the blood stream, thus becoming part of ourselves. The classical tradition, likewise, has ensured the intergenerational transmission of numerous Greco-Roman elements that have become firmly implanted in our culture, even if their origins are not easily recognizable. In the process, classical materials have fused with others of diverse origin to form the popular tradition as a whole. In this sense, tradition may be defined as the genetic code of a culture. In the case of Western culture, the classical tradition and Christianity are its two main genetic codes. But since Christianity first expanded under the guidance and guise of Greek culture and as part of the Roman world at just the moment when the Mediterranean