

Warrior and anti-warrior

By David Walsh
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Troy, directed by Wolfgang Petersen, screenplay by David Benioff

The majority of contemporary films are nearly impervious to wider modern realities and suffer the consequences. In many ways a mediocre and formulaic work, *Troy* manages nonetheless to catch at certain aspects of our present situation in a manner that allows it to rise above the mass of undistinguished and undistinguishable films.

Wolfgang Petersen's film was inspired by *The Iliad* of Homer, the story of the great Greek warrior Achilles during the Trojan War of antiquity. Screenwriter David Benioff and Petersen (*Das Boot*, *In the Line of Fire*, *Air Force One*, *The Perfect Storm*) have taken great liberties with the original. This is probably fortunate. Filmmakers at present have great difficulty imagining and recreating the inner and outer life of the very recent past, let alone another millennium.

The film and Homer's classic work exist in separate intellectual and artistic realms. This is a case of apples and oranges. There's no need or point in comparing them. The mental and moral universe of the ancient Greeks would need to be represented by some quite different artistic means. How would the "childhood of man," a time in which human beings were clear in thought but poor in technique, find artistic expression?

An entire series of common-sensical, practical bourgeois assumptions would have to be suspended. One does not expect such a work from Petersen and Benioff and one is not disappointed. This is a film that largely borrows the Greek-Trojan conflict to make certain assertions and observations about modern life, with varying degrees of success and insight.

The creators of *Troy* have dispensed entirely with the gods, who actively intervene in *The Iliad*, aiding or harassing the two warring camps.

The film treats the tragic events as entirely manmade. Paris, prince of Troy, absconds with the willing Helen, queen of Sparta, while visiting the Spartan court with his brother Hector to conclude a peace treaty. Helen's husband, Menelaus, calls on his brother, Agamemnon, king of the Mycenaeans, to organize a Greek army to punish the Trojans and restore his honor. Agamemnon has been looking for an excuse to launch a war against Troy and now he has one.

Achilles, the greatest of the Greek fighters, despises

Agamemnon for his greed and hunger for power, but he finds the prospect of earning eternal glory in a war with Troy irresistible. With a thousand Greek ships poised to land on the Trojan shore, Achilles storms the beach with his private force, sweeping aside the Trojan defenders. Showing no respect for the gods, Achilles lays waste a temple dedicated to Apollo, capturing a priestess and cousin to Hector, Briseis.

Angry and jealous, Agamemnon has the girl abducted and brought to his quarters. Thereupon Achilles refuses to fight any further for the Greek cause, remaining sullenly in his tent. Taking advantage of Achilles' absence, the Trojans make inroads and threaten the Greek camp. However, Hector's slaying of Patroclus, Achilles' cousin and close companion, brings the great warrior back into the fray with a bloody vengeance. In the end, however, it is sly Odysseus's invention, the Trojan Horse, that permits the Greek forces to enter Troy with terrible consequences.

Petersen is known, fairly or unfairly, as having benefited from the reputation established by the new German cinema of the 1970s (Fassbinder, Herzog, Wenders, etc.) to make a successful career for himself in the commercial film industry. His *Das Boot*, a World War II drama, appeared in 1981 as the wave of more oppositional and critical German filmmaking was subsiding.

Efforts such as *Air Force One* (in which the American president's airplane is hijacked by Russian terrorists) and *In the Line of Fire* (about a Secret Service agent haunted by his failure to prevent the death of John F. Kennedy) have not been particularly encouraging.

It may be that Petersen (born in 1941), who spent a decade working in German television before embarking on feature films, merely preserved his minor directorial talent while the industry around him was apparently losing its wits, but he brings a certain welcome competence to the screen. With whatever limitations in characterization and motivation, the drama in *Troy* coheres.

This may not seem like a great accomplishment, but after viewing dozens of carelessly or amateurishly made works, in which virtually all the elemental skills once displayed by the commercial film industry are lacking, Petersen's film comes as something of a relief. The director has some sense at least of pacing, timing, etc. Again, these may be small mercies, but we will nonetheless thank heaven for them with a clear conscience.

Aside from paying *Troy* that somewhat back-handed compliment, however, one is obliged to note that the film displays certain modest positive virtues.

There are no doubt scenes or individual shots (computer-generated in certain cases) that would tend to glorify military combat, to turn it into a grand and picturesque spectacle, but overall this is not a film that leaves one with a comforting view of war or warriors.

The filming of *Troy* began at approximately the same time as the US imperialist invasion of Iraq. With whatever degree of consciousness on the part of the filmmakers, Agamemnon's ruthless determination to use the pretext of Helen's transgression for his own gain clearly casts light on the contemporary situation.

Petersen spoke about the "preemptive" American war launched in March 2003. "I couldn't believe it. I thought, it's as if nothing has changed in 3,000 years. People are still using deceit to engage in wars of vengeance." While emphasizing that he "did not make this film with the intention of making an anti-American statement," Petersen told the press that the parallels between the Trojan and Iraq wars became more apparent on a daily basis during the filming. "Just as King Agamemnon waged what was essentially a war of conquest on the ruse of trying to rescue the beautiful Helen from the hands of the Trojans, President George W. Bush concealed his true motives for the invasion of Iraq." Petersen added, "I wouldn't make a movie like *Air Force One* now."

These comments and Petersen's willingness to permit current horrors to animate his work are entirely to his credit. Brian Cox is a memorable Agamemnon, a "remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain." His brother Menelaus (Brendan Gleeson) is a thug, a necessary cog in the war machinery.

Other characters and performances are less distinct. Certain performers perhaps did not stand a chance. How was newcomer (and model) Diane Kruger to impersonate Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, whose conduct, moreover, helps unleash a 10-year siege of a great city? An impossible task, particularly given rather insipid lines and scenes. Orlando Bloom as the ineffectual Paris is not much help. Peter O'Toole is moving in a sequence in which, as King Priam, he is obliged to kiss the hands of his son's killer and beg his mercy.

The Iliad, and *Troy* follows the original source in this, does not provide or seek to provide a comprehensive view of the decade-long Trojan war (whose real dimensions and date are still a matter of debate). It treats certain episodes in the ninth year of the war, centering on Achilles' behavior, specifically his all-consuming wrath, his pride and his several all-too-human changes of heart.

Whether the author of *The Iliad* intended Achilles' fury in particular to serve as a warning (it nearly wrecks the Greek cause) or to stand as an exemplary quality (in his anger Achilles lays low the most imposing of Troy's defenders, Hector, thereby substantially weakening the Greeks' enemies),

or perhaps both, a great deal depends in a dramatization of this story on the figure of Achilles.

Brad Pitt is successful, in my view, at suggesting certain qualities of the reinvented Achilles. First, the actor conveys something metallic and machine-like about the character. If Achilles has not been created by the gods to be a killer in this version, then his society has certainly conspired to make him what he is.

Pitt treats Achilles' fate as the greatest of warriors—as the relentless pursuer of immortality—as a burden, in the end, as a wretched burden. Someone must be the most feared and most despised in this barbaric world, and that unhappy lot has fallen to Achilles. From the outset this Achilles goes about his bloody work in a distinctly subdued and somber manner.

His relationship with Briseis, who resists and then falls in love with him, exposes him to the absurdity and indefensibility of his position, as the glory-seeking pawn of a monstrous expedition. Although there are clichéd and familiar elements to the Briseis role, Rose Byrne comes across as a real young woman, struggling both to survive and to elicit humanity from her captor, with some success.

At his best moments, Pitt represents Achilles as a congealed contradiction. The actor conveys at the same instant the character's overweening pride, as well as an element of self-knowledge, which borders on self-disgust. Achilles is both warrior and anti-warrior. He carries on with the war with all his energy and skill—that is his socially-determined fate, he can't be anything else—and at the same time recognizes its insanity and futility. An ambiguity with some basis in real life.

Perhaps Pitt, consciously or otherwise, also applies something of his experience as an acclaimed and absurdly celebrated film star to the role. In any event, he brings to life a man in love with himself and his profession and, simultaneously, capable of standing outside himself, so to speak, and observing his situation with disdain and even shame. *Troy* is worth something for those moments alone.

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