

## Issue 12: Book Reviews

### Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture

By Gideon Nisbet

Bristol Phoenix Press, Exeter, UK, 2006. ISBN: 1-904675-12-3. 170 pages. £12.99

A Review by Monica Bontty, University of Louisiana at Monroe, USA

The success of the film *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) resulted in a number of epic films and projects such as *Troy*, *Alexander* and the HBO/BBC mini-series *Rome* (2005). At the same time, there has been an increase in scholarship and courses on ancient history and popular culture. Based on works such as Wyke's *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome and Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1997) or Cyrino's *Big Screen Rome* (Blackwell, 2005), there is no doubt that films on ancient Rome have had a great impact on American popular culture.

Despite these and other remarkable works, it is extremely rare to find books on ancient Greece and popular culture based on the fact that cinema's Greece has always played second fiddle to ancient Rome. Why not ancient Greece? After all ancient Greece was the cradle of Western civilization and influenced not only the Romans but the Byzantines and Islam. It also influenced Western Europe during the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Fortunately recent works such as Winkler's edited collection *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic* (Blackwell, 2006) are helping to even the critical playing field. However *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) and *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2004) both performed very poorly at the box office and were panned by critics. Gideon Nisbet's extremely user friendly book explains why this happens and why ancient Rome is preferred to ancient Greece.

The author concentrates on major films such as *Troy* and *Alexander* as well as other underappreciated films that a mainstream audience might enjoy. He wisely omits films and tragedies from Greece and Italy since many English speakers are not comfortable with subtitles.

Through this careful choice of films, Nisbet demonstrates how and why Greece is such a hard sell. First of all, audiences have no idea of what to visually expect when it comes to Athens. Secondly ancient Greece brings up thoughts of intellectual elitism and the "Western Tradition." Most of all, society's unease with "Greek-ness" and the fact ancient Greece is associated with same sex desire has led audiences to prefer to make like Nero instead of making like Plato. Stuffy, colourless Greece just cannot compete with Rome and its standardized orgies, gladiatorial contests and large scale cinematic productions.

Chapter One, 'Socrates' Excellent Adventure,' sets up the framework for understanding why films

set in ancient Greece fall short in cinema. *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (Stephen Herek, 1989) is examined along with Roger Corman's *Atlas* (1960), Sergio Leone's *Colossus of Rhodes* (1961), Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* (1956) as well as various cinematic productions of Cleopatra.

Bill and Ted's trip to Athens shows Greece to be a dull boring place full of equally bored philosophers until the ultra cool and laid back Bill and Ted appear and spice things up. Even Socrates is grateful for a chance to leave Athens behind.

Modern audiences have the false impression that they are more familiar with Rome based on modern architecture such as courthouses and city halls. Movies fail because of these popular cultural prejudices of what it means to be Greek. Even when films have used actual Greek locations they have failed. Roger Corman's *Atlas* (1960) suffers from the use of old Roman standbys such as aqueducts, amphitheatres complete with Roman letters, Roman banquets and dancing girls. Despite bad dialogue, the author rightly praises this film, since it is well-informed about some aspects of classical antiquity. Sergio Leone's *Colossus of Rhodes* (1961) is also confused as to what Greece should look like. Here, in addition to the Roman themes, Hellenistic, Minoan, Assyrian and Egyptian motifs are used.

A clever adaptation of Homer, *Helen of Troy* (Robert Wise, 1956), benefited from classicist Hugh Gray. As a result, the script made use of primary documents in a respectful manner. Visually the film looks great since it is set in Greek prehistory. Homer's Achaeans are identified with the Mycenaens while the palace of Minos stands in for Troy. Despite its merits this film is not much fun, and also fails because the romance between Helen and Paris is too bland and boring to interest the audience. The chapter concludes with a discussion of various productions of Cleopatra, who also turns out to be more Roman than Greek in film.

Hercules, the only mythological hero to make it in Hollywood is the topic of Chapter Two: 'Mythconceptions.' 1960's treatments of Hercules starred a series of unknowns and resulted in a blurred image and interchangeable identities. Hercules's transformation to the small screen, in the form of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (Christian Williams, 1995-1999), was more successful because of its infidelity to the ancient sources. Similar to other productions on ancient Greece, Rome figured prominently in this series as well as its equally successful spin off *Xena: Warrior Princess* (John Schulian, Robert Tapert and R. J. Stewart, 1995-2001). A recurring problem with Hercules was what to do with Hylas, his boyfriend. *The Legendary Journeys* builds up the character of Iolus and therefore gets around this thorny issue.

Vin Diesel's plans to direct *Hannibal*, provisionally entitled *Hannibal the Conqueror*, may never be completed because of fan and critical reaction to the star. The Battle of Thermopolae is the subject of the in-production film adaptation *Gates of Fire*, and of Zack Snyder's *300* (2006). However, both suffer from the urge to make the Spartans icons of democratic machismo. Eric Shanower's Eisner-award-winning comic *Age of Bronze* (2001-) is far more authentic and ground breaking because it remains true to archaeological and literary sources. Petersen's *Troy* (2004) struggled from its inception and faced the same fate as most other films on Greece.

Chapter Three, 'The Wars of the Successors' looks at a string of film and film projects on Alexander the Great. Even though Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1956) promised to present "the real"

Alexander and even used HRH Prince Peter of Greece as its historical advisor, it falls short and is an iconographic mess. Rossen's denial of spectacle and avoidance of nudity contribute to the film's bland portrayal of Alexander. A surprising exception is the "lost" 1964 pilot of *Alexander the Great* (Phil Karlson, 1964) starring William Shatner, whose portrayal of the conqueror as a charismatic but rootless drifter should be considered as the most significant version of the myth of Alexander. The final projects discussed in the chapter reveal more about modern myths of nationhood and masculinity than the "real" Alexander. These include the once and future Alexander, the "best" Alexander, the passion of Alexander, an Alexander for Hellas, as well as Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004).

Stone's *Alexander* starred Colin Farrell and had the benefit of Robin Lane Fox as the historical advisor. Unfortunately, this film failed because it tried to please the needs and wants of various interest groups, and panders to academics by depicting Alexander as dreaming of spreading the "civilized" Greek culture. However, since this film is a remake of Rossen's 1956 epic, it too depicts a map of Latin place names like the original. Despite the cool reception and lack of success of movies like *Troy* and *Alexander*, the recent success of the film *300* (2006) should result in the production of more films and more scholarly works on ancient Greece and popular culture.

The structure of this book is very accessible because of the author's writing style and lively explanations. This work will appeal to a variety of audiences and assumes no previous exposure to the subject. Nisbet engages the reader because of his obvious passion for films, cinema, and popular culture. The glossary of key terms will prove useful to those unfamiliar with the terminology. Moreover, the guide to further reading provides ample material for those eager to learn more about Classics, film studies or on Rome, Greece and the cinema. This book is lots of fun to read and is highly recommended.

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