Violence tragique et guerres antiques au miroir du théâtre et du cinéma (XVIIᵉ-XXIᵉ siècles)

sous la direction de
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Atlantidε

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FILMIC ANALOGIES:

THE TROJAN WAR IN THE PRESENT

Notes toward an African Oresteia (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1969), *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004)

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Résumé : La comparaison, *a priori* insensée, entre le *Carnet de notes pour une Orestie africaine* de Pasolini (1969) et *Troie* de Wolfgang Petersen (2004), permet de dégager l'idéologie sous-jacente à chacune des deux poétiques mises en œuvre : deux poétiques du rapport entre l'antique et le présent, entre l'Histoire et le mythe et, ce faisant, deux conceptions du cinéma et de son rapport au monde. Chez Pasolini, l'analogie explicite entre la guerre de Troie et la guerre du Biafra, contemporaine du film, est à la fois un moment du discours analogique politique qui structure tout le film – et qui fait du Tiers monde le lieu d'une résistance espérée et vue comme encore possible à l'homologation néocapitaliste – et l'expression de la capacité du cinéma à se mettre au service du réel, à mettre au jour le mythe qui loge encore au creux de la réalité, dans les corps des humbles notamment, et à fictionner à partir de là. Dans *Troie*, l'analogie lâche entre la guerre de Troie et la guerre en Irak, également contemporaine du film, contribuerait plutôt à l'historicisation et à la rationalisation de l'épisode antique, autorisant alors un déplacement du mythe vers le cinéma : non plus le cinéma comme outil archéologique permettant de mettre au jour (l'invention archéologique) la dimension mythique du réel, mais le cinéma comme créateur (autre sens de l'invention), pourvoyeur de mythes, à commencer par les stars.

Mots-clés : cinéma, antiquité-contemporain, analogie, invention, star, mythe.

Abstract: The comparison, a priori senseless, between Pasolini's Notes Toward an African Oresteia *(1969) and Wolfgang Petersen's* Troy *(2004) allows us to identify the ideology that underlies each of the two poetics implemented in these films: two conceptions of the relationship between the Antiquity and the present, between History and myth, and two very different understandings of what cinema is and how it relates to the world. In Pasolini's film, the explicit analogy between the Trojan War and the Biafran War is simultaneously a moment of the political analogical discourse structuring the whole movie – seeing the Third World as a place of resistance, seen as still possible, to neocapitalistic "homologation" – and the expression of the capacity of the cinematic medium to put itself in the service of the reality, in so far as it can bring to light the myth*

still present in the reality, in the bodies of the humbles in particular, and to fictionalize from there. In Troy, the rather loose analogy between the Trojan War and the War in Iraq contributes to the historicization and rationalization of the ancient episode, authorizing a shift from the ancient myth to a new cinematic myth. In this process, the cinema is no longer an archaeological tool allowing to "invent" (to discover and bring to light) the mythical dimension of reality: it creates and supplies myths, beginning with the stars.

Keywords: *cinema, antiquity-contemporaneity, analogy, invention, star, myth.*

A t first glance, comparing Pasolini's *African Oresteia* and Petersen's *Troy* may seem senseless and arbitrary, as these films have *a priori* nothing in common. Originally shot for Italian television, the first is, as its complete title indicates, a series of cinematic notes ("appunti"), filmed in preparation for a filmic adaptation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in Africa. The theme of the "notes for a film to be made" is actually a fiction, a poetic delusion. The only movie ever envisaged is precisely the one that we have before our eyes: an open form exposed to the unexpected, a hybrid object hesitating between being a documentary of contemporary Africa and an adaptation of an ancient tragedy, a 'collage' of location scouting and casting, archive images and research of solutions for the adaptation of the ancient text. On the other side, we have a Hollywood blockbuster, a classical epic, solidly tied up and effective, with its stars and its bigger-than-life sets rebuilt in Malta or computer-generated. Nevertheless, I think that comparing the Trojan War according to Pasolini and the Trojan War according to Petersen/Hollywood could help us to highlight what each movie finds in Antiquity, and what it has to tell us about cinema and the way it relates to the world.

THE TWO FILMS' OPENINGS: ESTABLISHING THE FILM'S POETICS

Let us compare the opening scenes of Pier Pasolini's *Notes Toward an African Oresteia* and Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* before devoting more time to each film.

Notes Toward an African Oresteia

At the very beginning of the film, Pasolini superimposes (1) an atlas open to a map of Africa, (2) Aeschylus' book placed *on* the atlas *in view* of the map of Africa and, above, (3) the credits, indicating "a film written and directed by Pasolini". This palimpsest puts several elements into play: 1) myth and history – the myth of *Orestes* and the history of Africa, because, in 1969, this atlas can only refer to the western conception of Africa's borders and to the continent's recent decolonization; 2) distant times and spaces — ancient Greece and contemporary Africa converge; 3) different media — literature and cinema; 4) I would add – but time does not permit its proper development – a fourth element at stake: the contrast between the *authors* – Aeschylus and Pasolini – and how one of the implicit challenges of the film is the question of *translation*, since the book

placed on the atlas is none other but *The Oresteia*, translated by Pasolini himself in 1959, to this day a translation of reference in Italy.

Troy

The film begins, too, with an "old fashioned" map that anachronistically situates the names of the ancient cities that geographically situate the story to follow (Troy and the Greek city-state coalitions) inside the contours of contemporary Greece. A time indicator superimposed on the map situates the story very precisely in History: in 1200 BCE, i.e. the period archaeologists associate with the Trojan War. On this map, the boxes parade by, which indicates notably that Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, forcibly created an alliance of Greek city-states whose most powerful rival is Troy. It is important to keep in mind that the war in Iraq began simultaneously with the film's production and that the promotional discourse maintained the analogy between the Trojan War and the Iraq War, and the parallel between Agamemnon and George W. Bush[1]. But, as opposed to Pasolini's film, the analogy with the present is not explicit in the film: it situates itself in peripheral discourses and in the spectator's capacity, or willingness, to unmask the film's rather loose parallels to the present. Nevertheless, in reality, the film explicitly poses the question of the relationship between the past and the present, but from the standpoint of History shifting to myth: immediately following this map, before the beginning of the actual story, this voice-over is heard, bringing prologue to a close: "Men are haunted by the vastness of eternity. And so we ask ourselves: will our actions echo across the centuries? Will strangers hear our names, long after we're gone, and wonder who we were, how bravely we fought, how fiercely we loved?"

These two openings establish two poetics of the relationship between antiquity and the present, between history and myth. In so doing, they propose two conceptions of cinema. In each case, the recourse – or the return – to antiquity serves to say something about the medium.

THE *AFRICAN ORESTEIA*: MYTH "INVENTED" BY THE CINEMA

The analogy between the Trojan and the Biafran War

It is important to recall that Pasolini's first encounter with *The Iliad*, as he recounted in 1946, was the problem of Achilles' shield, which is described in the epic's eighteenth book. So it is, he says, that as an adolescent beginning to paint, he glimpsed the problem of the relationship between reality and representation[2]. And yet *African Oresteia* is precisely the film where he stages, meta-cinematically, the question of *reality and its representation*, and the passage on the Trojan War is, in this respect, extremely significant. As a matter of fact, after several location scouting and casting sequences, Pasolini says, "It's time to start telling our story". He then films what could be the guardian charged by

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[1] Gaël Grobety, *Guerre de Troie, guerres des cultures et guerres du Golfe : les usages de l'*Iliade *dans la culture écrite américaine contemporaine*, coll. « Echo », n° 11, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien, Peter Lang, 2014.

[2] Nico Naldini, *Pasolini, Biographie*, translated by René de Ceccatty, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 21-23.

Clytemnestra to watch for the return of Agamemnon, and on these images reads the corresponding abstract of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Immediately following, he chooses to represent "a possible flashback on the Greek army under the walls of Troy and on the Trojan War" with archival images of Biafra, inscribing the myth told by Aeschylus in History.

Why the Biafran War? Because the Nigerian civil war was a current event, during the film's production. The war began in 1967 and ended in early 1970. Furthermore, the war's large international media coverage brought to the western world's attention the problems confronting the developing world, especially after decolonization. In fact, in 1965, Pasolini wrote in his "Dialogs with Readers" column in the Italian Communist Party's weekly, *Vie nuove* ["New Roads"], that one of the aspects of the new world order is the imperative that the Communists take into account the fact that the Third World, with all of its humanitarian problems, also contains all of the hopes of the young, recently decolonized countries. The question, for Pasolini, is: which paths will the African nations take? He hopes for a modernity, and modernization, where the past and its traditions are not forgotten, unlike in the west's "neocapitalist homologation ["*omologazione*"]", to employ his language. And, indeed, for him, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is the bias by which he tackles and stages this question, since the story of Orestes is the story of the transition from an archaic society to a modern, democratic society, symbolized by the transformation of the Furies in Eumenides and Athena's establishment of the first human tribunal to judge Orestes guilty of matricide. Thus, although Pasolini does not really express interest in the geopolitical context of the Trojan and the Biafran Wars in the film, the analogy works also on a political level: both wars embody two outbursts of violence, symptoms of two archaic societies, two explosions of violence whose first victims are the humble, the faceless. After the violence, a new historical period, marked by the advent of democracy, emerges, or could emerge, integrating the past within the present.

Therefore, representing the myth with archival images of Biafra, Pasolini shifts from Myth to History and explicitly makes a film about contemporary events. But in the same time that he shows the contemporary Biafran history, he dialectically re-inscribes History in a metahistorical – therefore mythical – time, in a passage worth quoting:

> But this war shouldn't be taken as a particular war, that is, the Biafran War, but as an abstract one. Its images are metaphorical images of what could be the actualization of the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Of course, as I have repeated it many times, the main protagonist of my film, of which these are just notes, should be the people. Therefore, during this war, the humble soldiers who are injured, mangled, killed. [...] Nothing is more remote from these images than our common idea of Greek classicism. Nevertheless, pain, death, mourning, tragedy, are eternal and absolute elements which can very well connect these ardent and very actual images with the fantastic images of the ancient Greek tragedy.

What we have here is a declaration of poetics. The analogy between Biafra and Troy, between the present and the past, is nothing less than rhetoric. For Pasolini, who follows the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, reality is mythical, and myth is metahistoric. Therefore images of the present relate us to other times, and, more than that, can be images of other times, of the past. That is why his conception of the "metaphor" is at the center of his poetics.

The metaphor: filming the persistence of the past in the present

In his *What is the Contemporary?*, Giorgio Agamben writes that the true contemporary is he who adheres to his time "through a disjunction and an anachronism". A little later he writes: "the key to the modern is hidden in the immemorial and the prehistoric. [That is why] the entry point to the present necessarily takes the form of an archaeology[3]." In order to understand the functioning of Pasolini's anachronism – and the archaeology he applies – I would like to devote more attention to the word "metaphor", used when he says that the images of Biafra are not the images of a specific war, but are, instead, abstract images, the metaphor that updates the Trojan War. This reflection brings me back to my original point – the relationship between reality and representation – while at the same time illuminating the relationship Pasolini saw between myth and history. In a letter written to his friend Franco Farolfi, in August 1945, Pasolini used the term "metaphor" in relation to language, returning explicitly to the word's etymology. Pasolini sought to unmask the materiality inscribed within the words that naturally links them to reality (then contradicting the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign) :

> The words, my dear Franco, [...] are a color and a sound, a material fact, they are the ring that us connect to other unknowable forms, the metaphor, *metapherô*, that leads us beyond, that is, outside of ourselves: into the gentle world[4].

Words are metaphors. The speaker is carried (*pherô*) by the words that he pronounces beyond himself (*meta*), toward the world. In another text from the same period, Pasolini writes that "words are natural metaphors. They 'carry beyond'." Words carry us toward reality, because they *contain* reality. We could say that, if we give attention to them, words take us inside them, into the memory they contain. They take us toward the original and physical link that did exist between the word and the thing it designates. That is why they carry us "beyond", toward reality[5]. Thus, the images-metaphors from the Biafran War are images that carry us beyond the original temporality and historicity of this War. They take us toward the myth that this historical reality contains. The images of the Biafran war can take us to the mythic reality of Troy, just as the words naturally carry us, materially, toward the real world. Even more naturally than words, which always conserve an element of arbitrariness, cinema expresses reality, with reality itself. Pasolini embraced cinema precisely because he sought a medium capable of expressing reality *with* reality. The question of the representation of the past then arises, explicitly in these terms, regarding his film *Medea*, which he also directed in 1969, the same year as *African Oresteia:*

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[3] Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Padatella, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 41 and p. 51.[4] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Correspondance générale* (1940-1975), translated by René de Ceccatty, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 146.

[4] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Correspondance générale* (1940-1975), translated by René de Ceccatty, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 146.

[5] Pasolini might be influenced by the philosophy of language of Giambattista Vico.

> [B]y its nature, cinema cannot represent the past. Cinema represents reality through reality [...] Thus, in my historical films, I never had the ambition of representing *a time that no longer exists*. If I attempted to do that, I did it by analogy, that is to say, in representing a modern time in some way analogous to the past. There are still places in the Third World with human sacrifices, where one can witness the human tragedy in the impossibility of adapting to the modern world: that is the persistence of the past in the present that can be objectively represented[6].

And we could add the persistence of myth in History, in the present. It is necessary to understand that the images of Biafra are metaphors because they take us beyond, toward a mythical reality that they contain. One could say that, for Pasolini, the metaphor is a connection or relationship and not just of comparison but also of integration. Later in the text on *Medea*, he writes that the present is "the figural integration [integrazione figurale] of the past[7]". As I said, for Pasolini, influenced among others by Mircea Eliade, reality is mythical, it contains the myth, it is informed by the myth. This is how he expresses it, during the course of the film, while filming popular faces:

> [B]y their realism, these people carry in themselves this mythical and sacred moment that makes them say phrases, for example: [Follows a long quote from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, starting with: "God, if that is truly your name and you accept that I invoke you I weighed everything: it is not just you who can truly free me from the nightmare that afflicts my heart."]

Here we have the idea of a mythical speech, a *muthos*, which naturally arises from these bodies and is literally expressed by bodies. These popular bodies still contain in themselves this mythical tale, contrary to western bodies, already "homogenized" [or "homologated"], which no longer contain any memory of the past. Pasolini shifts, thus, to Africa because, there, the myth still has play, is still read in History and in the bodies – and especially in popular bodies. It is only there that cinema can still film the past, not only to record it but also to cinematically invent it, in the archaeological sense of the word "invention": to discover, to bring to light – to cinematically express the contemporaneity of the past.

TROY: MYTH CREATED BY THE CINEMA

The analogy with the War in Iraq

Troy also raises the question of myth and history. And it resolves, in a very different manner, the question of a *cinematic* mythical invention. The map upon which the film opens is the sign of its historicizing approach to the Trojan War, which is staged as a historical fact. The film's promotional material, such as it is visible in the DVD's bonus

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[6] Pier Paolo Pasolini, « Il sentimento della storia », *Cinema nuovo*, XIX, n° 205, maggio-giugno 1970, republished in *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, t. II, Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude (ed.), Milano, Mondadori, 1999, p. 2818-2820.

[7] The word « figurale » certainly refers to Erich Auerbach's notion of *Figura*.

content, emphasizes historic Troy, by frequently harkening back to the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, or by insisting on the participation of the historical consultant Lesley Fitton[8]. As Jonathan Burgess highlighted, the allusions to the war in Iraq served to confirm the plausibility of this portrait of Bronze Age imperialism[9]. Indeed, the pretext of Helen's abduction, cited by Agamemnon, in order to force the Greek city-states into an imperialistic war against Troy – a pretext clearly emphasized by Achilles and Hector – can only conjure up the Bush Administration's claim to the presence of weapons of mass destruction as a pretext to wage war in Iraq. Achilles warns Patroclus, who is eager for battle: "Don't waste your time following some fool's orders." Ultimately, the film combats every reason for going to war; and the only entirely positive character is Hector, who will only fight, out of patriotism, to defend his own country. To his brother, Paris, who claims to be ready to fight and die for Helen, he responds: "Have you ever fought? I have seen men die, and there is nothing glorious, nothing poetic [in that]." This touches upon one of the film's contradictions: the pacifist discourse is undermined by the unsurprising epic spectacle – glorious and poetic of course – of war.

This contradiction is intimately connected to the character Achilles. His primary motivation, repeated numerous times, is the desire for glory – *kleos* – achieved on the battlefield. And this glory/*kleos* justifies the shift from History to myth, that is to say, the shift from the geographical map at the very beginning of the film to a positive response to the voiced over question following this map: "Will our actions echo across the centuries? Will strangers hear our names, long after we're gone?" Clearly, the question is a rhetorical, even performative, declaration, to which the film itself is a positive response. By that, the film thus offers itself, at the outset, as a mythopoetic medium, a sort of modern *aoidos* proposing a new performance and thus a reinvention of the myth of Troy. The voice-over returns at the film's end. We learn only then that it is the voice of Ulysses, who has just laid coins over the eyes of a dead Achilles to pay the ferryman Charon to take him to Hades:

> If they ever tell my story, let them say I walked with giants. Men rise and fall like the winter weed, but these names will never die. Let them say I lived in the time of Hector, tamer of horses; let them say I lived in the time of Achilles.

Thus, the staging of the Trojan War is framed at the film's beginning and end by a voice-over, which inscribes the story, and the History of the war, in the long term of *muthos*, which traverses the centuries.

Rationalization and cinematic myth

Even within the film, however, there is a constant process of rationalization at work, from the first appearance of Achilles, played by Brad Pitt. A boy seeks him out in his tent in order to battle the giant and asks: "Are the stories about you true? [...] They say you can't be killed." Achilles responds: "Then I wouldn't bother with a shield, would I?" Thus, the film stages the legend in order to immediately question it with the voice of

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[8] DVD Warner Bros, Collector, 2004.
[9] Jonathan Burgess, "Achille's Heel: The historicism of the Film *Troy*", in Kostas Myrsiades, *Reading Homer*, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009, p. 163-185.

Achilles. The continuation of the exchange is interesting. The boy persists: "The Thessalonian you'll fight is the biggest man I've ever seen. I wouldn't want to fight him." To which Achilles responds: "That's why no one will remember your name." Several elements are at work here: 1) An underlying philosophical statement, according to which the man is and merits something by his actions (one is not born, one becomes, mythical). In a certain way, the Greek *agôn* is here permeated by the ideological vein of the "self-made man". 2) But it is also a cinematic challenge: while questioning the legend, the film has the possibility of re-creating it. And its legend will inseparably associate Achilles with Brad Pitt: Achilles will become, or will again become, immortal in the skin of Brad Pitt. Cinema celebrates itself and celebrates its capacity to create myths, among them, its stars.

The episode concerning Achilles' heel is significant[10]. At the end of the film, Achilles returns to Troy to save Briseis with whom he has fallen hopelessly in love, Hollywood style, and is killed by Paris' arrows. The first hits his heel, the crucial moment emphasized by Briseis's scream of anticipation when Paris pulls the bowstring taut; the music reaches its crescendo the moment the arrow pierces his heel. There is one close-up on Brad Pitt's face, gasping for breath, followed by a detail shot on the heel pierced by the arrow. The myth of Achilles is entirely on display, in this single flaw in his invincibility, and the film deploys all of its cinematic weapons to stage it. But the veracity of the myth is immediately put into question. The first arrow does not kill him. In fact, according to the film, Paris unleashes three more arrows to his chest. In a final heroic gesture, Achilles rips out the three arrows. When the Greeks find him dead, only one arrow remains – in his heel. Thus, the process of creating the myth is staged. History shifts to myth, on two levels. First, it is the error of the appreciation of the historical fact that opens the road to mythifying. At the same moment as the event, the Greeks naively misinterpret what is before their eyes. But, second, the myth is legitimated by the extraordinary heroism of Achilles, who earns his mythic status over the course of the film, and who, certainly, seems to consciously contribute to the formation of his own myth by staging his death with a single arrow. Likewise, during his first encounter with Hector, he refused to fight him because there were no spectators[11].

Achilles is not alone, of course, in creating his own myth. The star, Brad Pitt, never completely loses himself in the role. There are certain moments where Pitt strays, slipping out of character, exposing his own skin. The analogy, if there is one, lays between the hero and the star: Achilles is obsessed with his name – and its place in History or legend. And the film forges the association between the name of Achilles and that of Brad Pitt.

AS A CONCLUSION: WHO'S "MYTHIC"? THE HUMBLE *VS* THE STARS

Troy thus implements a historical rationalization (eviction of the gods, Achilles himself negating the legend of his immortality, filmic rationalization of the myth of Achilles' heel), allowing a cinematic mythologizing, serving the *persona* of Brad Pitt, obviously merged with Achilles. This is a poetics of "invention" very different from Pasolini's

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[10] See Kim Shahabudin, "From Greek Myth to Hollywood Story", in Martin Winkler (ed.), *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, Malden, Blackwell, 2007.

[11] "Why kill you now, prince of Troy, with no one here to see you fall?"

African Oresteia: the myth is no longer to be found within the people but in these exceptional beings, the ancient heroes and the contemporary stars. Indeed, Pasolini's conception of reality led him to seek (to "invent", in the archaeological sense of discovering and bringing something to the light[12]) in the faces and popular bodies of the still "ancient", not yet "homologated" African people, the myth they still contain. He builds with these historical and present, real and mythical faces and bodies (those of the Africans at the end of the sixties) the figures of the ancient warriors: Agamemnon as well as the humble victims of the struggles. On the contrary, *Troy*'s objective is to recreate the myth through spectacular cinematic means, to closely associate it with its stars. The film thus expunges the popular. Beyond the major roles, played by famous actors, we *see* no one, despite the several mentions of soldiers or people dying unjustly in war. In reality, there are only masses of people — computer-generated figures — flooding long shots. The film extras are virtually invisible. In an article entitled "People Exposed, People as Extras," Georges Didi-Huberman recalls the ordinariness of film extras: men without features, whom, I quote, "have a face, a body, their own gestures, but the staging requires them to be faceless, bodiless, gestureless."[13] And he recalls that in French slang, the word for "extra" — "figurant" — like the word "stiff" in English, designates anonymous cadavers stacked in the morgue, awaiting identification. The anonymous, those "without identity," they are at the morgue. Or in the netherworld. Or drowned in the indistinct mass of faceless soldiers: in this nothingness that Achilles flees by looking for glory, the *kleos*, and the access to a mythical status. Nothingness also haunts the movie stars. But nothingness is the common lot of the humble, of the anonymous faces, of the battalions, whom Pasolini films in close-up to make them enter the field of representations, from which they are most of the time excluded. The two films implement, therefore, two different poetics, which are also two different, possibly antagonistic, manners in which to deal with reality.

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[12] Roland Barthes, about the concept of « invention » in ancient rhetoric, writes: "Invention is less an invention (of arguments) than a discovery: everything is already there, it just needs to be found: the notion refers more to an extraction than a creation." (Roland Barthes, « L'ancienne rhétorique », *Communications*, 1970, vol. 16, n° 1, p. 172-223.)

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