Immortals

"In peace, sons bury their fathers. In war, fathers bury their sons. Are we at war, father?"

~Athena

Corinthian helmets and Clash of the Titans; movie star-gorgeous ensembles and the muscled bronze cuirasses of soldiers—that's right: Tarsem Singh—professionally known as Tarsem—has become only the latest director to breathe life into the dusted archaeology that is Greek mythology. Tarsem's *Immortals* loosely weaves together the threads of various Greek myths, such as that of Theseus and the Minotaur, and that of the Titanomachy—the great war between the gods and the Titans.

Otherwise known for his Y2K-era science fiction horror *The Cell* featuring Jennifer Lopez, and his 1991 music video *"Losing My Religion"* for the American rock band R.E.M., which won Best Video of the Year at the MTV Video Music Awards, Tarsem is perhaps best known for his opulently memorable 2003 Pepsi commercial starring Britney Spears, Pink, and Beyoncé. The three star as brazenly sexualized, finely-armored gladiatrices who bring a coliseum of rowdy Roman onlookers to their feet with a rendition of *"We Will Rock You,"* along with Enrique Iglesias, their surly emperor who falls victim to their retaliation and ends up as cat-food for a hungry lion. Perhaps this is where Tarsem first gained an interest in the cinematic production of the classical world, and so *Immortals* was born.

Immortals tells the story of the apostasy of the bloodthirsty King Hyperion of Heraklion (Mickey Rourke), and his quest for the legendary Epirus Bow, which he plans on using to unleash the imprisoned Titans from Mount Tartarus. After defiling an oracular shrine and capturing the virgin oracle Phaedra (Freida Pinto), Hyperion sacks the small seaside village in

which Theseus (Henry Cavill) resides with his ostracized mother and elderly, mysterious mentor (John Hurt), killing Theseus' mother in the process. Enslaved by Hyperion at a remote salt mine, Theseus teams up with Phaedra and a common thief, Stavros (Stephen Dorff), to escape and thwart Hyperion's conquest to release the Titans. Meanwhile, Zeus (Luke Evans), the King of the Gods who had until this point been disguising himself as Theseus' elderly mentor, handles politics on Mount Olympus with an iron fist, declaring no god may come to the aid of a mortal lest they pay the ultimate price: *death*. What ensues is a series of bloody battles, licentious lovemaking scenes, and a myriad of mythological inaccuracies that ultimately culminate in a final showdown between those who are mortal and those who are immortal—Theseus and the Olympian gods versus Hyperion and the deposed (and visibly *decomposing)* Titans.

Immortals' focus rests in the thin but powerful line between the mortal and the immortal. Where Petersen's *Troy* and Cacoyannis' *Iphigenia* and *The Trojan Women* reimagine their respective myths without a divine presence entirely, Tarsem embraces that very presence with wide-open arms. The immortal gods wield an inordinate amount of power over the mundanely mortal world around them. Take the scene in which Poseidon (Kellan Lutz) plunges from Mount Olympus into the ocean, striking it with his trident and creating a massive tsunami, which destroys Hyperion's fleet and saves Theseus and company from their deaths. And yet against the Titans, the gods' flesh tears and they fade from the living world just the same as their mortal counterparts. Moreover, Theseus' apotheosis is far from the most physical pain he experiences throughout the film—in just a quick glow of warm golden light, he is whisked to Olympus and made a god by Zeus (let's make sure Heracles doesn't hear that there's a *pain-free* option when becoming a god). This defies the traditional understanding of apotheosis as understood by the Greeks (again, just look at Heracles), and thins the boundary between mortal and immortal. In

essence, the boundary between being an immortal and a mortal, while significant, is relatively thin—thin enough that Theseus' transition into godhood is entirely painless. Interestingly enough, the immortals in *Immortals* aren't really immortal at all—they die, much like Ares, at the hand of Zeus. In fact, the "immortals" of *Immortals* are more like super-humans, or Nietzsche's *Übermensch*—they occupy a seemingly liminal state in which they are not quite mortal, but certainly not immortal, but somewhere in between.

It is admittedly hard to gauge the mood of the *Immortals'* audience (after all, it *was* only released in 2011—11/11/11, as the posters will remind you). Just months before, the world had seen the Egyptian Revolution, the Royal Wedding, and the assassination of Osama bin Laden. However, the truth is that the audience of *Immortals* was likely tired of the chilly November air, and wanted to see the oh-so-cool Hollywood blockbuster with a shirtless Henry Cavill and Mickey Rourke as the crazed villain. Conclusively, *Immortals* doesn't take itself too seriously.

At its core, the narrative structure of *Immortals* is fairly simplistic: the bad guy wrongs the good guy on his quest for world domination and the good guy and his cohort of equally admirable friends fight him to preserve world peace. However, it is *how* the story of Theseus and Hyperion is told to us that is truly wonderful. Unlike most films, which follow the "good guy" religiously, *Immortals* shows the point-of-view of both the good *and* the bad guys. For example, we see Theseus and crew pleading unsuccessfully to King Cassander to arm his forces against Hyperion, and one jump-cut later we see Hyperion using the Epirus Bow to destroy the gates of Mount Tartarus. While *Immortals* is in fact a linear story, it is a two-dimensional one, and this makes the narrative stand out. Tarsem here accomplishes what many other directors fail to do—he lets us see into the mind of "the other." In this case, this is Hyperion. By presenting the story through the eyes of both Theseus and Hyperion, Tarsem makes the narrative wholly believable:

as it is revealed, Hyperion was not always bloodthirsty and angry at the gods, but turned this way when the gods remained silent as his wife and children were consumed by disease and died miserable deaths. The duality of narration is also this film's narrative drive: the juxtaposition between Theseus and Hyperion's actions despite them both being motivated by the deaths of their loved ones is enthralling, and undoubtedly keeps the audience riveted and wanting more.

Where *Immortals* slumps in structural necessities such as depth and accuracy (don't worry, we'll get to *that* later), it more than exceeds in visual technique. Unabashedly, *Immortals* is a cinematic wonderland—for one-hundred-and-ten glorious minutes the screen is dipped in rich honey golds and steely grays, creating a delectable landscape that is definitively Bronze Age Greece and yet still so visually modern, almost like a Renaissance painting. Tarsem himself admits that he sought out to make *Immortals* "Caravaggio meets Fight Club." And so he did; a perfect example of how Tarsem harkens back to the Renaissance is the film's final shot, which shows a mighty war in the sky between the now-apotheosized Theseus and the other gods and the Titans. The shot is full of motion, each combatant in a battle stance—you can hear the din of war even without sound. The immortals are clad in golden armor and luxurious robes. But most importantly, this shot finds order in the disorder and clutter of it all—it's a scene so elaborate it belongs on the vaulted ceiling of a chapel.

Amongst *Immortals'* plethora of breathtaking shots and symphonic scenes, there a few standouts. One such standout is the moment in which Zeus, enraged by Ares' disobedience by aiding of Theseus, kills Ares—his own son—with a fiery whip in front of Athena and Theseus himself. This shot is filmed in slow motion, which heightens the dramatization by both drawing out the inevitability of Ares' death, and by allowing the audience to stop and ponder, "Is this really about to happen?" This shot is particularly noteworthy for the concoction of backlighting

and high-contrast light—Zeus, Ares, and Athena radiate an aura of gold light that distinguishes them from Theseus and the other mortals, while the marble walls behind them are almost entirely shrouded by streaks of darkness. Ultimately, this emphasizes the movement of the gods by suppressing everything else on screen—a common occurrence in the film; they are *gods* after all. What makes *Immortals* great is the variety of visual techniques it employs, all of which further add to the film's visual appeal. Nearly every scene featuring Hyperion is low key, filmed in almost total darkness with pools of light, as if screaming to the audience, *"Yes, this is the bad guy."* Hyperion's victims—the priest, Theseus' mother Aethra, Lysander, among others—are confined to the bottom of the frame, indicating their powerlessness and vulnerability, and their imminent deaths. We even get a bird's-eye view—literally. In one scene, Zeus takes the form of an eagle and watches Theseus and Hyperion far below, allowing us a glimpse of the mortal world through the eyes of a god.

While the film's acting may not have warranted any Oscar nominations, the cast gives life to each character and makes them believable; they commit wholeheartedly to their roles.

Astoundingly, the audience is able to look past the fact that such recognizable stars as Henry Cavill, Mickey Rourke, and Freida Pinto comprise the main cast—they *are* their characters. Cavill is equal parts endearing and awe-inspiring as Theseus—a real hero the audience can get behind—with his brawny muscles and go-getter attitude. Phaedra is wise and pious, but haunted by her oracular visions, and it is this torment that Pinto harnesses and wholly encapsulates. Evans as Zeus is stern and uncompromising, but perhaps a bit too stoic for someone so invested in Theseus. And then there is Rourke as Hyperion: he delivers well on the raspy, foreboding-voiced villain but matches Evans' Zeus in the inability to emote. The acting is, above all, effective, successful, and polished in execution.

This film's *coup de grâce,* however, is its lack of mythological accuracy. But strangely, it wasn't the big things that bothered me here. I actually didn't mind the fact that there is no interaction between Zeus and Theseus in any surviving myths, or that Phaedra was actually a princess and Theseus' second wife, or that Theseus never became a god and was instead the mythological founder-king of Athens, or even that the film's Minotaur was really just Hyperion's henchman with a helmet shaped like a bull's head. No, it was the little things that really got to

me. The most obvious problem is the death of the gods—the film is literally called *Immortals,* and yet we see several gods die just as easily as mortals. And then there was Zeus' decree that no god may interfere in the affairs of mortals, despite the fact that the gamut of Greek mythology is, quite literally, the gods *exclusively* interfering in the affairs of mortals. In fact, if the gods hadn't interfered in mortal affairs, Hyperion would have defeated Theseus halfway into the film. And then there's the sexualized Athena (Isabel Lucas)—whose revealing garments and seductive speech are more akin to Aphrodite than the virgin goddess of battle. But my biggest gripe is with the Pantheon, which here consists of Zeus, Athena, Poseidon, Apollo, Heracles, and Ares, before his death. Tarsem completely ignores the countless other gods that populated the minds of the ancient Greeks—and yet strangely, an army of gods appears in the film's final shot. Where were they when they faced off against the Titans, whose numbers are seemingly infinite? Why these gods, and not also the other Olympians? These questions are left unanswered by Tarsem.

In terms of effectiveness, *Immortals* wins big. While it may lack in mythological authenticity, it is at its core a Hollywood production, and it certainly caters to the general masses, most of whom are unaware of Tarsem's quite loose interpretations of Greek mythology. *Immortals* is effective in that it is a classic good-prevails-over-evil narrative. Theseus, the hero, is triumphant over the likes of Hyperion—he becomes a god for his bravery and sacrifice. In fact, Tarsem's reimagining of Greek mythology isn't even really a classical crime—it is in fact part of a larger narrative of the retelling and reinterpreting of oral and written myths. The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur itself has been reinterpreted by the likes of Plutarch and Horus, among others. Overall, Tarsem Singh's *Immortals* is a visual masterpiece and an effective, albeit loosely interpreted, retelling of a popular myth; four of five stars.