

The Waters of Lethe as the Only cure for a Martial Life: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Homecoming Soldier Topics in HBO's *Rome*

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Summary

A transversal issue through the ages, post-traumatic stress disorder and problems concerning soldier's adaptation to civilian life were as present in Antiquity as they are nowadays. Mainly a film studies essay, the present text is an attempt to understand how HBO's *Rome* series more or less covert allusion to post-traumatic stress disorder might have resonated in audiences marked by this clinical condition, and the specific context of American filmic production in the first, war-driven, decade of the 21st Century. By way of introduction, we will first carry out a survey regarding the complex relation the public establishes with modern representations of the past to, subsequently, dissect some crucial narrative points which we take as illustrative paradigms. Through a close analysis, almost a diagnosis process, of the two main characters, Pullo and Vorenus, we intend to show how post-traumatic stress disorder representations are imbedded in those characters and to what extent the staging of this problem using an Antiquity background may be understood as a symbolic metaphor in the new millennium.

Keywords: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Soldier, *Rome*, Military life, Antiquity.

Resumen

Temas transversales a través de las edades, el trastorno de estrés post-traumático y los problemas relativos a la adaptación del soldado a la vida civil estaban tan presentes en la antigüedad como hoy en día. Principalmente un ensayo de estudios cinematográficos, el presente texto es un intento de comprender cómo la alusión más o menos encubierta del trastorno de estrés post-traumático en la serie *Rome* puede tener resonado en un público marcado por esta condición clínica, en el contexto específico de la producción americana cinematográfica de la primera beligerante década del siglo 21. A modo de introducción, primero se llevará a cabo un estudio acerca de la compleja relación que el público establece con las representaciones modernas del pasado para, posteriormente, analizar algunos puntos cruciales de la narrativa que tomamos como paradigmas ilustrativos. A través de un análisis minucioso, casi un proceso de diagnóstico, de los dos personajes principales, Pullo y Voreno, tenemos la intención de mostrar cómo representaciones del trastorno por estrés pos-traumático están incorporados en estos personajes y en qué medida la puesta en escena de este problema mediante un fondo de antigüedad puede ser entendida como una metáfora simbólica en el nuevo milenio.

Palabras clave: trastorno de estrés pos-traumático, soldado, *Roma*, vida militar, antigüedad clásica.

The author states that this article is original and that it has not been previously published.

Technical Details

Title: *Rome*.

Other titles: Roma (Spain).

Country: UK, USA.

Year: 2005-2007.

Director: Various.

Music: Jeff Beal.

Creators: Bruno Heller, William J. MacDonald, John Milius.

Main Cast: Kevin McKidd (Lucius Vorenus), Ray Stevenson (Titus Pullo), Polly Walker (Atia of the Julii), James Purefoy (Mark Antony), Ciarán Hinds (Julius Caesar), Max Pirkis (Gaius Octavian), Indira Varma (Niobe), Michael Nardone (Mascius).

Color: Color.

Runtime: 52mins (aprox.), 22 episodes (2 seasons).

Genre: Action, Drama, History.

Production Companies: Home Box Office; British Broadcast Corporation.

Synopsis: A down-to-earth account of the lives of both illustrious and ordinary Romans set in the last days of the Roman Republic.

Awards: 8 Emmy Awards (2006/2007), 2 Golden Globe Nominations (2005).

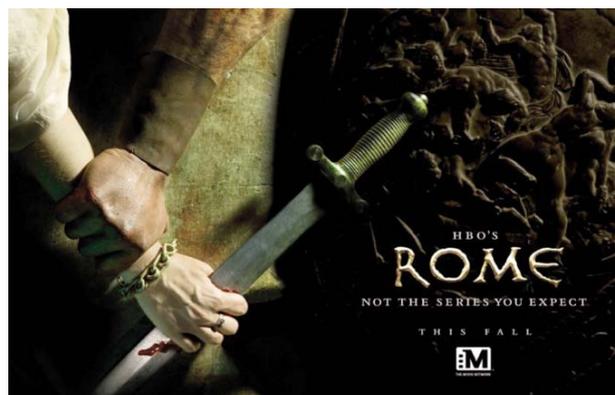
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0384766>

Contemporary Representations of the Past

During the classroom scene of Jean-Luc Godard's 1964 acclaimed film *Bande à Part*, there is a close up shot in which we can see written on the blackboard the emblematic phrase: 'classique = moderne'. Following the literary tradition associated with the aesthetical rhetoric of the French director, the discourse of this simple image denotes, in a way, some of the very essence of the possible correspondences between past and present. It is against the background of this phrase that we will examine how issues such as the returning soldier in the classical world are still valid in modern America.

As Maria Wyke¹ has shown us in *Projecting the Past*, the paradigm of Ancient Roman history has played a prominent role in modern societies 'in the formation of national identities'^a, and that cinema was a privileged

channel to create the notion and 'awareness of historical continuity', albeit evoking 'invented traditions'^b. Cinema – and television, at a later stage - developed increasingly efficient narrative devices from the early 20th Century therefore acquiring the ever more sophisticated properties needed for the representation of history, for narrative is intrinsic to historical film^c. Hence, cinema as a mass medium of entertainment with increasing popularity, - in this case namely through the appealing of visual conceptions of Antiquity - has been able to reach modern audiences and to build bridges between present and past. Effectively, profuse examples among the tradition of the historical epic film can be found in which we can observe this interchanging scheme, even though in different forms and with rather diverse ideological and aesthetic purposes (e.g. to consolidate concepts such as *romanità*, in Italy, political ideals in the United States^d, or even the adoption of the point of view of a particular religion^e). This way, audiences have been invited many times before to receive messages implied and coded in an identification with Rome.



Anchored on the above-mentioned premise, we propose a reading of HBO's (Home Box Office) co-production with the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and RAI (Radiotelevisione italiana) two season series *Rome*, for many considered as a turning point in the representation of Ancient Rome, and the way it refers to the problematic of the homecoming soldier. As we will see, *Rome* opted for an historical recreation that would take into account the different *nuances* of a complex society while, at the same time, transporting the

a Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, p. 14 (1).

b Hobsbawn, E. apud Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, p. 14 (1).

b Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, p.10 (1).

d Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, p. 14-22 (1).

e Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, p.28-32 (1).

spectator to the new, spectacular – but rather simple and ‘real’ - represented quotidian (2)^{2f}. Thus, this series is also a case in which we can verify the establishment of a strong connection with contemporary audiences. With its ‘creative desire to surprise viewers’^{3g}, the series provides a different approach to Roman life, focused in a more accurate and naturalistic portrayal of its daily and social internal dynamics, rather than the traditional, *Hollywoodesque* moral narrative, centred in one main character, or the depiction of an exotic, and/or spectacular/monumental Rome (also associated with an American tradition of representation)^{4h}. In this sense, the title itself suggests the portrayal of the broad concept that is “Rome”. As Lockett reminds us, Hollywood’s historical films emphasized ‘history’s defining moments and events pivoting on the actions of a handful of powerful, monumental people [whereas] *Rome* rejects unified, deterministic history in favour of a series of *accidental* histories’⁵ⁱ. Indeed, in *Rome* there is a clear separation between social spheres, for we omnisciently oscillate through them as we follow the main narrative thread in a ‘unique dramatic friction’^{6j}. This shift of focus and juxtaposition between opposed and parallel environments invites us to travel through other parts of Rome, away from the *clichés* of the *Colosseum* or *Circus Maximus*, thereby recreating the zone of the Aventine hill and narrow, nameless streets, in which we can see the recreated reality of the criminal underworld of Ancient Rome.

Being necessarily a convergence of historical occurrences and characters and fictional elements^k, these ‘representations of the past must be something with which viewers can identify’^l. According to Pittman: ‘the producers of *Rome* claim that this [way of depicting] “is actually more familiar as it dramatizes universal truths about human nature”^m, hence meeting Theodorakopoulos’s statement that, ‘historical film (...) dwells on the more “universal” aspect of humanity’ⁿ. Thus, instead of establishing only a logic of the creation of historical continuity (as described above) the *Rome* series dialogues with contemporaneity, the identification device being based, on the exploration of human univer-

sals, since the series places them in a perspective capable of providing us a detailed observation.

Concerning this question, it is also worth mentioning that this is possible only because *Rome* is not a film, but a television product. Even though it is not the first television series to depict events occurring in Ancient Rome, the format of the series, which divides the narrative into many episodes and even seasons, allows us to scrutinize in depth a vast array of themes (and establish connections between them) in a way that a single feature film cannot. Although shot in 35mm film (according to Ray Stevenson’s audio commentary on episode 5), television possesses its own grammar and technologies, and reaches the audiences in different ways from cinema: close-ups, compact framings, emphasis on dialogues rather than on a meaningful, metaphorical gaze, and the preference for the private, intimate (both physical and psychological) space (‘an ensemble drama’, as Lockett calls it^o) are favoured in order to fit into the scale of the small screen and adapt to domestic consumption, thus fulfilling the conditions for a thorough, close view of the many complexities, found both in characters and the different narrative levels.

It is in following this line of thought, and considering these aspects that, from the several interesting points we could consider in *Rome*, we shall, first, focus attention on how the series presents the issue of the homecoming soldier and the consequent problems war veterans find in their reinsertion into society and civilian life. Secondly, we will try to understand how this specific anxiety, addressed internally in the series, is actively engaged with the broader context of contemporary social history and can, to some extent, also be related to the time of the production of the two seasons, therefore utilizing Ancient Rome as a base to communicate and meditate about present urgencies. Effectively, the relevance of this question is mentioned by Lee L. Brice, who claims: ‘Other aspects of military life, including the use of soldiers as political thugs, brigands and mercenaries, and the difficulty of adjusting to civilian life appear in the series [and] await future opportunities for discussion’^{7p}.

f Haynes, ‘Rome’s Opening Titles’, pp 49-51 (2).

g Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare in Film and Television*, p.210 (3).

h Theodorakopoulos, *Ancient Rome at the Cinema*, pp 18-21 (4).

i Lockett, ‘Accidental History’, p.104 (5).

j Cyrino ‘Introduction’, p. 6 (6).

k Cyrino, ‘Introduction’ p.4 (6).

l Haynes ‘Rome’s Opening Titles’ p. 51 (2).

m Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, p. 210 (3).

n Theodorakopoulos, *Ancient Rome*, p.20 (4).

o Lockett, ‘Accidental History’, p. 104 (4).

p Brice, ‘The Fog of War’, p. 75 (7).

We, therefore, propose to make a contribution in this context.

Methodologically, the *corpus* we will take into account for this analysis is the twenty-two episodes complete series of *Rome*, which approximately covers the period of twenty two years, from Caesar's conquest of Gaul, in 52 B.C., to the aftermath of the Battle of Actium, in 31 B.C. . Regarding bibliography, it is important to note that there is extensive literature, both in the field of Ancient Warfare and modern psychological/sociological studies around the effects of war and violence on individuals – namely, concerning posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Concerning the latter, Aaron Glantz's *The War Comes Home*, contributes enormously to the understanding of a wide range of issues related to the way veterans fit into society, and how the government deals with their eventual professional, physical and psychological needs.

Most remarkably, there is also the tendency to intertwine these two areas and to carry out intertextual transversalities. In other words, works such as *Achilles in Vietnam*, *Odysseus in America* (both by Jonathan Shay) and *Experiencing War: Trauma and Society from Ancient Greece to Iraq War* (edited by Michael B. Cosmopoulos) point out that there is a potentially beneficial outcome from the merging of these two discourses that, despite all the centuries and different cultural circumstances between them, are able to communicate with each other^{8q}. Thus, it is possible, within some limits, to read ancient accounts, such as Homeric poetry and myths^{9r} – considered to contain human universals, as old as war itself - in the light of modern psychological and trauma studies. Goldsworthy, for instance, finds some similarities between past and present characteristics on the structure of armies: 'In many respects it was surprisingly modern (...) many aspects of the life and daily routine of the Roman army would be instantly familiar to modern soldiers'^{10s}.

The series spins around two "fictionalized" characters (they appear in Julius Caesar's commentaries on the Gallic War), who have been inserted into the context of historical events: Lucius Vorenus (Kevin McKidd), a first spear centurion and later prefect on the Evocati; and Titus Pullo (Ray Stevenson), a 'Forrest-Gump' style legionary^t. Both belonging to the 13th legion, throughout the series we watch the evolution of their complex

friendship, since there is a constant tension between comradeship (e.g. Vorenus will be dearly addressed by Pullo as 'brother' during his depression) and ranking protocol (during a great part of the first season Vorenus will not hesitate to remind Pullo of his place, even inside Rome). As the narrative unfolds in the context of the Civil War, and featuring characters with military history, we can distinguish three different main hierarchies from the very first episode, in which we see the chain of command: the common soldier (*miles*), the officer (*centurio*), and the general (*imperator*). Consequently, and in order to accentuate the divide between classes that the series is committed to portray (the distinction is particularly acute between generals, from a noble and wealthy background, and all the plebeians, despite their military ranking) the characters have different experiences and perceptions of war according to the rank they belong to. Their social circles also see their deeds differently.

In the first episode of season one, we see Gaius Julius Caesar (Ciáran Hinds) (Figure 1) and Mark Antony (James Purefoy) (Figure 2) comfortably installed in the camp dealing mainly with diplomatic and personal issues, while the soldiers are outside recovering from a battle, which took place a few hours earlier. In the meantime, back in Rome, both Atia (Polly Walker) and Servillia (Lindsay Duncan) express the still-standing idea that war is capable of bending a man to brutality and rendering wild the most civilized person. When receiving a brief letter from Caesar, Servillia regrets that 'he's a soldier, not a poet', while Atia states when hearing the news of her uncle's return: 'the man has been in Gaul for eight years (...) he is practically a wild beast'.



Figure 1. Gaius Julius Caesar.

q Cosmopoulos, 'Introduction', p. 5 (8).

r Matsakis, 'Three Faces of Post-Traumatic Stress', p.195 (9).

s Goldsworthy, *Roman Warfare*, p. 26-27 (10).

t Cyrino, 'Introduction', p. 5 (6).



Figure 2. Mark Antony.

This higher category, constituted by the Patricians and high-class people of Rome, such as Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Gnaeus Pompey Magnus (Kenneth Cranham), as Goldsworthy mentions, saw combat mainly as a means of gaining social prestige, increasing personal fortune and acquiring political power^u. As the series shows, these reasons were not shared by the common soldier, who enlisted to pursue rather modest ambitions compared to those of the generals. However, apart from the example mentioned and later observations of Octavian (Max Perkins) about Mark Antony's belligerent temper, the homecoming soldier issues and the way war shapes a personality, either by trauma or habit, are present mainly in the cases of Vorenus and Pullo, since, as we will see, the audience can easily identify with the paradigms they embody.

From the beginning we are aware that both these men have in common their plebeian background (although Vorenus descends from a respected family, and Pullo is the son of a slave and a freedman) but have distinct natures and circumstances. Vorenus is regarded as a "stoic", ('sullen' to use Atia's adjective when referring to him), a proud and highly committed man, with his mind and heart on his family, while Pullo is presented as a "hedonist", a violently driven man, prone to indiscipline and trouble, with a simple mind and, as he himself affirms, 'Simple tastes: I like to kill my enemy, take their gold and enjoy their women'. Thus, to some extent, they seem to fit into two common stereotypes of soldiers – or, more precisely, veterans. As the narrative advances we see the consequences their war-changed temperaments

influence both decisions taken and the way their loved ones are affected by these constraints.

Theodore Nadelson, in his book, *Trained to Kill*, asserted: 'the soldier's real work is killing'^{11v}. Paraphrasing the same author, the qualities that are commendable in a soldier are useless outside the context of the army, making him a social threat during times of peace. As a radical, unforgettable experience^w, 'the soldier who kills is permanently changed'^x and exposed to rather contradictory psychological stimuli: on the one hand, he has succeeded in surviving and is praised for his killing abilities; on the other hand, the impact of these experiences tends, progressively, to distance him from the behaviours seen as "soft" in civilian life^y. In fact, for many, 'war becomes perpetual'^z, and they find great difficulties in disconnecting from an activity that generates both hyperalertivity and addiction. Like Ulysses, they have lost the capacity for social trust^{12aa} and no longer recognize their homeland, tending to maintain the same instincts that kept them alive before, when the dangers were real, or granted them promotions and awards.

As we will see, problems described in today's world by American veterans are addressed and portrayed in *Rome* – which, for all purposes, is also a product of today's world - through different perspectives, albeit the undeclared intentions of the producing team – there is not a clear position, for they do not seem to overtly confess an intentional critical or even political purpose. Before proceeding into our more in-depth analysis, it is important to underline the reality of the increasing number of USA citizens (first with the war in Vietnam and, more recently, with the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq) diagnosed with PTSD. The official statistics of the Veterans Affairs mental health services estimate that 'by march 2008, over 130.000 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans have been diagnosed with a psychological illness'^{13bb}. In some sense, and considering that HBO's has its major market share in the USA, it is unlikely that a large amount of viewers would not feel somehow connected to this issue, and the way the series portrays it - especially during a time when the audiences were particularly susceptible to war references in culture. Ancient Rome is therefore a good setting to explore this because it refers to a militarized society.

u Goldsworthy, *Roman Warfare*, pp. 90-95 (10).

v Nadelson, *Trained*, p. 37 (11).

w Nadelson, *Trained*, p. 48 (11).

x Nadelson, *Trained*, p. 37 (11).

y Nadelson, *Trained*, pp. 37-42 (11).

z Nadelson, *Trained*, p.121 (11).

aa Shay, *Odysseus in America*, p. xv (12).

bb Department of Veteran Affairs apud Glantz A, *War Comes Home*, p. 6 (13).

We shall first consider the case of Vorenus, and then Pullo's, with a particular emphasis on his "umbilical" connection to the 13th legion. Despite the already mentioned differences between the two cases, the history of these characters is so interwoven that it is not possible to completely isolate one from the other.

The Honour and Pride of Lucius Vorenus (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Lucius Vorenus.

'A war-hardened yet peace-seeking soldier'^{14cc}, when returning to Rome, the apprehensive centurion who has been away for almost a decade, longs to meet his wife and children again, to leave his past behind (knowing it would do no good to him in a new profession) and start a new, decent and prosperous life. However, independently from his good intentions, he proves incapable of readjusting into society. Constantly haunted by the fear of dishonour and disrespect (honour being a concept of great significance for a proud man and soldier), Vorenus tries to affirm his leading position as *paterfamilias* through obsessive and intransigent authority, which only generates fear and revolt on his loved ones. The same seems to be a persistent problem among veterans. A recent study claims that: 'twenty-two percent said their children did not act warmly toward them or were afraid of them'^{dd}.

Vorenus's vocabulary, tone and way of addressing other people (even his own family) is still the same he had when he was in Caesar's camp, "under the standard", as a centurion. 'I order you to stop', he assertively tells his wife. After this complicated reunion moment, Niobe (Indira Varma) bitterly confesses: 'And now he's home and I wish he was in Gaul. (...) Not one loving word

to me or his daughters'. Similarly, Melissa Resta, the wife of an American veteran who returned from Iraq - therefore, someone in Niobe's position today - states about veterans' behaviour towards family that: 'They're numb. There's nothing in there'^{ee}. Cinematically, the chromatism involving the first scenes of the reunion is rather cold. The neutral and pastel colours (green, gray and brown) predominant in Vorenus's house and clothing not only suggest his modesty compared to the colourful interiors of the high-class villas, but also the sensation of a suspended - emotional - dynamic.

In effect, discipline and obedience are central to Vorenus, since he conceives no other reality apart from issuing orders and assuring they are carried out, and blindly obeying his superiors. Symptomatically, the oath of loyalty sworn to Mark Antony, his eternal general, is the only force capable of pulling him out of his inertia, after the suicide of Niobe and Erastes Fulmen's (Lorcan Cranitch) provocations.

In the sequence of his return for the first time, when projecting his future, Vorenus thinks aloud and admits (as Pullo will admit more than once) that 'soldiering is all I know'. Indeed, his discomfort with socializing can be clearly seen during the party scene in the courtyard of his house: the clumsy and disinterested way he dances with Vorena contrasts with the joyful atmosphere, with which he seems unable to connect. In a way, the army is both the place where Vorenus thinks he can obtain prestige and money for his family, and his inescapable tragedy. After refusing the offer from Erastes Fulmen - a type character representing the lure of easy-money through obscure and criminal affairs, and hence a natural temptation to individuals deviated from common conduct - as an active bodyguard, Vorenus accepts Antony's proposal against his conscious will and serves in the *Evocati*, a military force constituted only by those few honoured with a special invitation of a consul. Ironically enough, socially recognized honour appears to be the main distinction between becoming Fulmen's or Antony's henchman; the task itself would not be much different.

As is stressed by director Jeremy Padeswa, in the audio commentary on episode 9, set after the Battle of Útica and the soldier's homecoming, 'Vorenus treats things the way a soldier does'. In this episode, the scene in the courtyard presents the 'problem of the returning soldier to his family', showing us a failed attempt on

cc Cooke, 'Caesar's Soldiers', p.79 (14).

dd Glantz, *War Comes Home*, p.11 (13).

ee Glantz, *War Comes Home*, p.17 (13).

Vorenus's part to play with his children. As he enthusiastically finishes his description of a battle (during this we can see a close-up shot of his children's bored faces) he abruptly punches the table causing little Lucius (Marco Pollack) to cry. This example reinforces the idea of the existence of an ever-increasing gap between Vorenus and his family, and *vice versa*. Regarding this fact, it is also interesting to note that the centurion (as he keeps being called by the people) is aware of the communication problems with his family and feels compelled to overcome them, though unsuccessfully. However, Vorenus is incapable of deviating from what war has turned him into and circumventing the difficulties and constraints provoked by a prolonged absence. In a way, he is torn between the above-mentioned dilemma of the soldier: he doesn't know what is wrong and what is right, since he stands only for soldierly values to justify his inelasticity of character.

In fact, like many sufferers of PTSD, Vorenus can be viewed as a rather depressed man – almost on the verge of paranoia, caused by feelings of guilt and shame (mainly, fails to duty) before his familiar tragedy -, regarding with apathy aspects of life that extrapolate the domain of his culturally induced values and self-imposed serenity. Notably, and contrary to Pullo, he does not even find any kind of solace in being useful by helping the community of the Aventine. During his time as captain of the *collegium* or in his short political career, his main concern is in following orders or complying with the republican ideal (at this point we see his narrow thinking and blind obedience make Vorenus the perfect pawn in Caesar's strategy), not showing particular interest for the good of the people or in his own achievements as a social individual. As Brian Cooke wrote: 'Vorenus may have exchanged a soldier's tunic for a Senator's toga, but fundamentally he was a career soldier whose greatest allegiance was to his commanding officer.'^{ff}.

Close to the end, during episode 20 (*A Necessary Fiction*), Vorenus almost chokes to death his daughter, Vorena the Elder (Coral Amiga) (Figure 4), right after he discovers that she betrayed his trust (we can possibly read this as a twinning of Niobe's wrongs) and compromised a crucial secret operation. In the following of this event, and somehow analogously to Shay's metaphor of Ulysses to refer to those soldiers who re-enlist and became addicted to war, Vorenus finally withdraws from his *paterfamilias* efforts to watch over and keep the family together and follows Mark Antony to Egypt, therefore



Figure 4. Vorena the Elder.

revealing to us his true inclinations and priorities: the army is where he has belonged since the first moment; the only meaningful lifestyle for him, for he has - consciously - failed to adapt into civilian life. In its turn, in the present, a former navy lieutenant who bombed Iraq during the first invasion considers himself 'completely dysfunctional', admitting that, when he returned, he was not 'able to be a father to them [his two children]'^{gg}. Concerning this particular issue, the editing plays a rather important role, for it tends to cut the connections between Vorenus and his children. Indeed, they are rarely framed together, and the shots are taken from different angles – a fact that further accentuates the disruption of the connection - as if there were two (or more) separate actions.

Carl Franklin, director of the above-mentioned episode, expressed in the audio commentary his opinion about Vorenus's resolution: 'He [Vorenus] is one of those people who cannot adjust to civilian life (...) That's what happens to career soldiers'; adding to this, the filmmaker self-consciously relates the paradigm of Vorenus to the contemporary reality of the homecoming soldiers, 'It is such a modern concept. We think of it as being a modern concept... But you guys [the producers] inserted it into what I am sure what happened [in Ancient Rome]'. This way, the Vorenus character is able to create mixed-feelings in the audience; we are not sure whether we should sympathise with him or not.

The last scene of episode 5 (*The Ram Has Touched the Wall*) as Vorenus completes his rite of passage to the Evocati, the priests paint his face red, marking him with the signal of blood – the symbolic mask of his tragedy, as we can also interpret, apart from the context

^{ff} Cooke, 'Caesar's Soldiers', p.85 (14).
^{gg} Glantz, *War Comes Home*, p.xx (13).

of the historically recreated ritual. The medium shot of a candlelit (*chiaroscuro* enhances dramaticism) most solemn Vorenus, donned in full armour and red-covered face, swearing loyalty to the Roman army, might probably be the ultimate metaphor that tells us, contemporary viewers, the design and destiny of this character.

To some extent, we can find a double of Vorenus in the character of Sgt. William James (Jeremy Renner), in Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008). Similarly to the Roman centurion, James is a man permanently charged with high responsibilities and a firm sense of duty. When he returns home, instead of a warm-coloured, slow motion, idealized welcome reunion (as we often see in other war films of the last twenty years, such as *Pearl Harbor*, *Courage Under Fire*, or *Black Hawk Down*) we see an austere, cold-coloured world and, for example, his awkwardness in making such a trivial choice as choosing a pack of breakfast cereals. Plus, he too has problems in reaching his wife and son: the couple does not communicate effectively, for James's morbid conversation topic appears to be most uninteresting to his wife (Evangeline Lilly). By the very end of the homecoming sequence, James's son's fascination with everything seems to contrast greatly with his father's pessimism, who says: 'The older you get, the fewer things you really love [and] by the time you're my age maybe it is only one or two things... For me, I think it's one'. Right after this, we hear the sounds of helicopters, it cuts, and we come to realize that Sgt. James is happily back in the theatre of war, thus justifying the film's initial motto: 'War is an addiction'.

Titus Pullo, of the 13th legion (Figure 5).

Another side of the same coin, Titus Pullo is, in many aspects, the opposite of his brother in arms. Rarely seeming to weigh his acts or consequences, his impulsive temperament contrasts with the almost naïve lightness and delicacy he often shows towards women and friends. This rawness can be seen in the battle of the first episode, when we see a brutal Pullo breaking the formation lines in order to meet and kill as many enemies as he can. Moreover, most of the killings he carries out are depicted in a particularly gory way, with explicit amputations - a body-fragmentary editing contributes to this - and blood spilling. Ultimately, and similarly to a number of veterans nowadays, he does not seem to be capable of resolving any dispute, however insignificant it might be, without killing or considering violent methods^{15hh}. For

example, in episode 2 (*How Titus Pullo Brought Down the Republic*), he has no hesitations in killing the man across the table when the cheating scheme is discovered, or to murder in cold blood the love interest of Eirene's - with whom he idealizes an idyllic relationship - in episode 10 (*Triumph*).

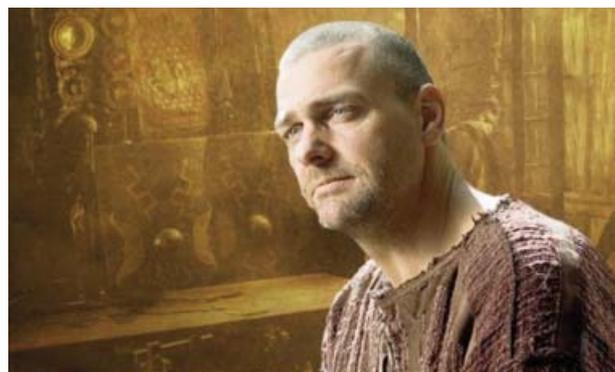


Figure 5. Titus Pullo.

Settled for the greatest part of the series under Vorenus's hospitality, at a certain point we come to know that Pullo has no family and no place to go. Living in a precarious situation and not willing to re-enlist, he does not manage to find any solution apart from capitalizing on his abilities as a soldier in criminal activities, namely when he joins Erastes Fulmen, who tempts the ex-legionary with the argument: 'these are hard times for war veterans' (episode 10). Effectively, even today's ex-militaries tend to be in a similar condition: they often end up going in the direction of crime and/or homelessnessⁱ. At this point, we should take into account that: "The transition from soldier to citizen was (...) extremely difficult, if not impossible, for common soldiers like Pullo who chose not to reenlist and were little prepared for any vocation other than war". Indeed, Pullo is absolutely conscious throughout the whole series about this aspect. Notably, on episode 18 (*Death Mask*), he admits: 'Killing is my trade, you know how it goes in peace time for people like me.' Still regarding this, it is also worth mentioning the scene in episode 11 when, in the sequence of the appeal of another ex 13th, Mascius (Michael Nardone), Vorenus tells Caesar that: 'If they [the veterans to whom Caesar promised lands] are not satisfied, they will turn to banditry and raiding'.

However, in this context, probably the most remarkable feature of Pullo's character is the unshakable

hh Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, p. 180 (15).

ii Glantz, *War Comes Home*, pp. xx-xxi (13).

devotion he nurtures for the 13th legion, and the way it is deeply embedded at the heart of his very own identity. To Pullo, the 13th is the closest thing he has to a family – it is, at least, a brotherhood. Effectively, soldiers throughout the ages seem to be tied by this fraternal concept, regarding their legion/regiment as an abstract, meaningful entity, which mediates the bonds and creates a collective unity. Hence, this mutual feeling of belonging is a crucial element to reinforce the indispensable motivation in an army.

Paradigmatic of this is, in episode 11 (*The Spoils*), when standing in the arena after being convicted to death for his murderous acts, Pullo refuses to fight until the instigating gladiator offends the 13th. This insult works as an instinctive trigger in Pullo's spirit, provoking an outburst of irrational rage, for the concept of the 13th is the last sacred thing for him. Put in a context of life and death, the legionary starts crying, '13th!', like a madman, and begins to proceed as if he was in the battlefield with his legion, hence not quite realizing his actual circumstance. Analogously, Vorenus, who was in the crowd, cannot feel indifferent to the evocation of the legion and, against all pragmatism, jumps into the arena, also cries for the 13th, and saves the exhausted Pullo. This powerfully dramatic scene, clearly enhanced by the slow, minor-key music, shows us that soldiers can, under extreme conditions, instinctively re-engage with slumbered battle experiences and behaviours they may have tried to keep inside. Besides, it accentuates the fact that these two men are deeply connected by the symbolic concept of the legion. Later, in episode 21 (*Deus Impeditio Esuritori Nullus*), the motivating properties of the 13th will reappear, as a battle cry, when Pullo, Mascius and the remaining of the Aventine faction fight Memmio's (Daniel Cerqueira) gang.

From these examples, we can therefore assume that Pullo, Vorenus – and even Mascius – are men who walk different paths and suffer from distinct agonies and social cares – certainly different from those of the Patricians – but, ultimately, most of the causes of their troubles derive from the exposure to military life and battle. Ultimately, they are affected enough to tend to act as if there was a *continuum* between military and civilian life, not being able to see and draw the line at some point and separate those two.

Final Remarks

At this stage, we should now take into account the place the topic of the homecoming soldier, thoroughly addressed, as we saw, in *Rome* (broadcast in the USA between 28th August and 20th November 2005, and from the 14th January to 25th March 2007), occupies in contemporary American visual culture and its trends. As Cynthia Weber argues, the war films after 9/11 (as well as the changing point-of-view over earlier films of the late 90s) were designed to meet the new official US foreign policy and underpin the 'War on Terror'^{16jj}, which, in its turn determined 'a war movie's prejudicial construction of cultural otherness'^{17kk}. Therefore, as Guy Westwell asserts, we saw a period of production of films 'released in close proximity to the start of the war in Afghanistan' – namely *Black Hawk Dawn* (2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002) – with 'clear patriotic and pro-military tendencies'^{18ll}. As this author also remarks: 'This experience of war is, in the West, only imagined from afar'. In this sense, this cultural imagination of war is susceptible to distortions and manipulations that would tend to regard and disseminate the idea of soldiering as a 'honourable activity'^{19mm}.

Addressing issues such as identity, morality and memory, this cinema aims to reveal 'America's nostalgia for a "greatest generation", who according to films such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*, fought the good fight and paved the way for democracy and freedom'²⁰ⁿⁿ. In this context, for instance, 'viewing Pearl Harbor in September 2001 was rarely an escape from reality'^{21oo}. In fact, watching 'any film depicting military conflict or terrorism resonated with US audiences; regardless of its historical setting'^{22pp}. It is precisely in the following of this train of thought that we may conclude that *Rome* was broadcast during a time when the American audiences were particularly responsive to historical parallelisms. Therefore, one of the elements that made *Rome* so popular might have been its contemporary pertinence, since it contained a great number of factors that would allow for a strong connection with the public. However, intentionally or not, by subliminally addressing questions related to the homecoming soldier (a reality experienced by many generations of Americans since World War II and a growing concern in public mental health) it is countering the main, "official", trend that

jj Weber, *Imagining America at War*, p.2 (16).

kk Westwell, *War Cinema*, p.110 (17).

ll Westwell, *War Cinema*, p.1-3 (17).

mm Westwell, *War Cinema*, p.108 (17).

nn Westwell, *War Cinema*, pp. 110-115(17).

oo Weber, *Imagining America*, p.3 (16).

pp Weber, *Imagining America*, p.4 (16).

was offering a perspective of praise and legitimizing of war – the above-mentioned, but posterior, *The Hurt Locker*, does the same even more overtly. By producing this antagonistic, non-romantic vision of war and its consequences on individuals, *Rome* indirectly exposes and deals with what was becoming an increasingly inconvenient social taboo.

Ultimately, we can conclude that *Rome*, among many other things, is capable of teaching (or reminding) us an important lesson: war marks the soldier for the rest of his life; and there are never any real winners, for no one escapes uninjured. It generates socially incapable people, and communities may still suffer from this sort of impact many decades thereafter. Recalling Godard's image (somehow resembling a Nietzschean cyclical idea), present and past are connected and coexist within the same frame.

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