

1997

The Image of Ancient Rome in the Cinema

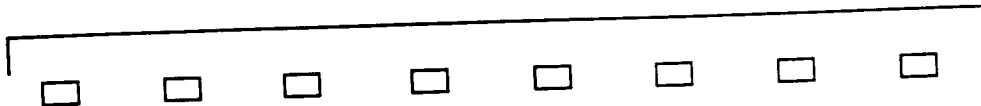
Carl Mora

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/ma_fsp

Recommended Citation

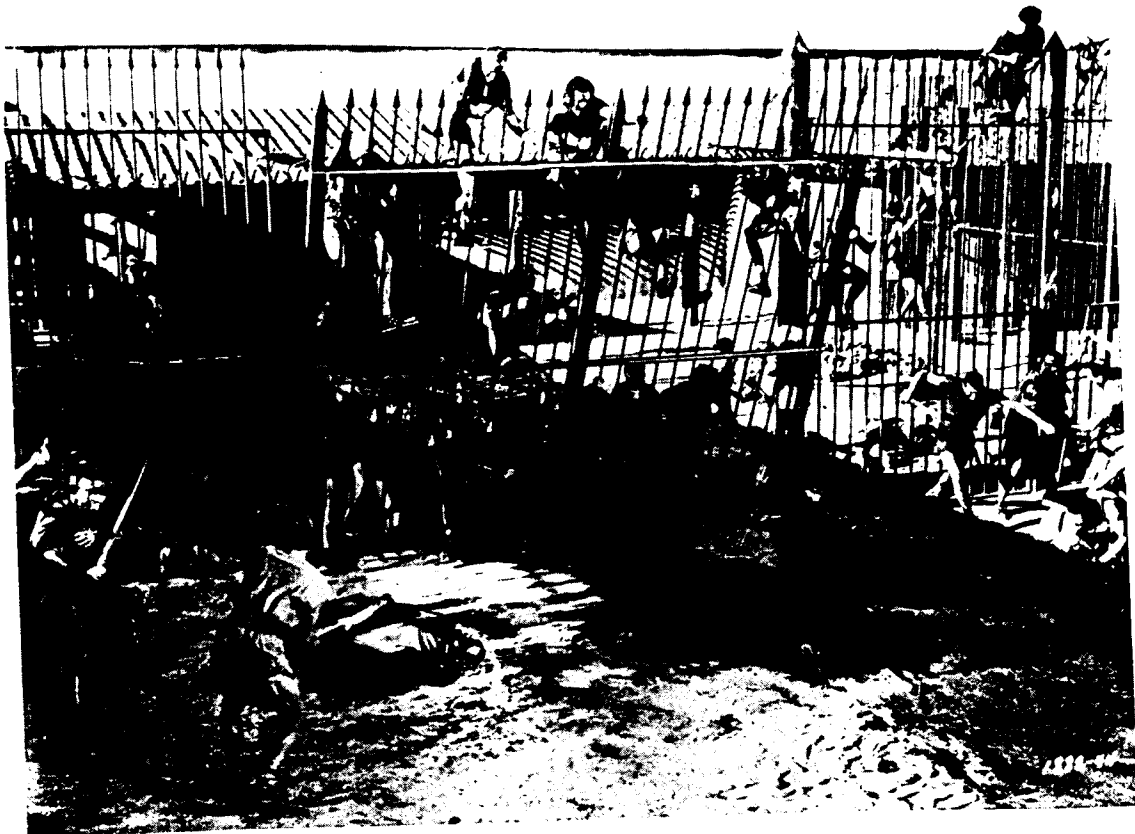
Film Historia, Volumen VII, Numeros 3, 1997, p221-243

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Cinematic Arts at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.



Entrevista con
Nelson Pereira
DOS SANTOS

CARL J. MORA
Eduard Huelin



The Image of Ancient Rome in the Cinema

CARL J. MORA

The ancestral memory of the Roman Empire has been the most persistent theme defining European civilization. From this vanished political entity of antiquity the modern divisions of Western, Central, and Eastern Europe have drawn much of their governmental, military, religious, and cultural heritage and practice. It is not surprising then that Europe repeatedly has sought to reestablish a semblance of «the glory that was Rome»—beginning with Charlemagne's Carolingian Empire in the 6th century A.D., continuing with the Holy Roman Empire in the 8th century A.D. (which lasted until 1806), and followed by the various renaissances beginning in the 14th century which sought to recuperate the scattered classical literary traditions. The culmination of these neo-Roman restorative trends came with the 20th century Italian and German Fascists' overwrought attempts to recreate what they perceived was the martial spectacle and power of ancient Rome.

The constant conflicts among the competing nation states that eventually succeeded the Roman Empire periodically gave rise to attempts to reestablish the «Pax Romana» under the hegemony of one or another European state. First was Spain in the 16th century seeking to establish religious and ultimately political control over the rest of Europe. Then in the 17th and 18th centuries, France, England, Austria, Russia, and their allied lesser powers warred to maintain the «balance of power»—in other words a strategy to prevent any one great power from establishing itself as the «new Rome.» This was followed by Napoleon's effort to establish the predominance of the French Empire over all of Europe, an empire whose political and military symbols were deliberately patterned after those of Rome.

Mussolini boasted to the Italians that he would restore the greatness of the Roman Empire (even though his expansionism perforce was limited to Libya, Ethiopia, Albania, and, disastrously, Greece). Nazi Germany under Hitler made a much more serious attempt to bring Europe under one imperial rule although he called himself «fuehrer» and not Kaiser, or Caesar, as his imperial forebears did. And after World War II, the Soviet Union, successor state of the Russian Empire whose monarch was also referred to as Caesar

(Czar), imposed its hegemony over half of Europe. In our day, with these historical attempts to reestablish a universal European order bloodily played out and discredited, Europe has been moving cautiously to a voluntary unity based on the common interests of the various countries.¹

With the image of Rome such a powerful recurring theme in Western culture, it is not surprising that it has also played a major role in the cinema. However, it is the filmmakers of just three countries who have mainly turned to ancient Rome for inspiration: Italy, the United States, and Britain. The film industries of France and Germany have rarely drawn upon their countries' distant histories as province or adversary, respectively, of the Roman Empire for filmic themes.² Neither have Spanish filmmakers even though the Iberian peninsula settled down to be a loyal province after fiercely resisting Roman conquest for 200 years, even contributing two emperors, Hadrian and Trajan, and the philosopher Seneca. Of course, the major factor is economics because historical spectacles that require the recreation of ancient buildings and cities and the clothing of thousands of extras in period costumes have always been extremely expensive. But other factors are also operative such as culture and differing historical perspectives.

The Roman Empire at its peak of power and territorial extent also coincided with the pivotal event of the formation of European culture—the establishment and expansion of Christianity. The epic story of the birth of Jesus Christ in the eastern extremity of the Roman Empire and the subsequent spread of Christian teachings to the very heart of earthly materialism and power—the great city of Rome—would be an irresistible topic for generations of filmmakers in various countries.

THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL EPIC, 1905-1937

Often pejoratively described as «sword 'n' sandal epics,» Italian spectacle films based on ancient Roman themes originated with the birth of Italian cinema. But «a better and more respectable term»³ is *peplum*, a Latin word for the standard garment worn in ancient times and consequently the most common costume worn in these films. Between 1905 and 1926, Italian filmmakers made at least nineteen films based on historical themes, but overwhelmingly about Rome.⁴

The factors involved in the emphasis given by American, Italian, and, to a lesser extent, British filmmakers to Roman themes, and the apparent disinterest in these by French, German, and Spanish cineasts are varied. Obviously, the historical consciousness of Italy after its unification in 1871 was naturally directed to ancient Rome. The city of Rome was designated as the capital of a

unified Italian kingdom, even as it had once been the center of the Mediterranean world. After the disintegration of the Roman Empire, Rome became the center of Christianity and to the present remains the home of the Vatican, the headquarters of Roman Catholicism. In the twentieth century, Rome became the filmmaking center of Italy. And a city replete with ancient buildings—the Forum, the Coliseum, the Via Appia, the Catacombs, the Pantheon, the Baths of Caracalla—would obviously present inspiration to filmmakers. As James Hay writes: «For the modern political apparatus, images of the Roman Empire evoke a primary, unified...state—a time before Italy's subsequent centuries of subjugation to foreign countries. Myths of ancient Rome deny Italy's more immediate past.»⁵

The creation of the modern Italian state in 1859-1871 was accomplished after centuries of domination by foreign powers. Thus Italian nationalism, not unlike that of the Germans who also achieved national unification at the same time, was characterized by bombast and romanticism. As Pierre Leprohon wrote: «Italian imperialism, hotheaded and confused because young and insecure, spoke loftily of transforming the Mediterranean once more into a *Mare Nostrum*.»⁶ Although large areas of Italy were plagued by poverty, illiteracy, and lack of sanitation, Italy, soon after its unification, embarked on a «megalomaniac policy of nationalism, armament and colonialism that bore no relation to its real possibilities.»⁷ One result of this policy was the defeat of Italian forces by the Ethiopians in 1896—the only European country to be decisively bested militarily by native Africans in the 19th century and a tremendous loss of face internationally for Italy. The memory of this humiliation still smarted in the 1930s when Mussolini, vowing to avenge the old defeat, invaded Ethiopia.

Such a national preoccupation as the aspiration to be considered among the first rank of European powers and realizing that the latter generally viewed such Italian pretensions with undisguised contempt, found expression in the Italian cinema before and during Fascism. To quote James Hay:

The historical film was certainly the clearest expression of cultural essentialism and nationalism in Italy during the 1920s and 1930s; it sprang from the social and psychological pressures of modernization in those years and it gave presence to a collective desire for international identity, which achieved fruition in war.⁸

The historical genre was hardly unique to Italy; it was widespread in a Europe obsessed in justifying its national policies by recourse to the past. But the persistence of the genre in Italy «led to the emergence of a peculiarly Italian

style of historical film.»⁹ The first international hit of the Italian spectacle film was Giovanni di Pastrone's *The Fall of Troy* (1911), although it was followed by the even greater success, on both sides of the Atlantic, by Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* (1912) based on Henryk Sienkiewicz's popular novel of pagan decadence and Christian courage in Nero's Rome. The lavishness of the sets was something completely new to moviegoers—the Roman crowds, the persecuted Christians, the lions in the arena, the burning of Rome while Nero composed his verses; «...these images quivering with life enthralled audiences in every country.»¹⁰

Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) is one of the most important films in the early period of world cinema, its influence far greater than that of *Quo Vadis?* It was to have a strong effect on D.W. Griffith and play a critical role in the development of Hollywood cinema, which alone had the financial resources to continue and enlarge on the genre. Again, we turn to Leprohon: «None of Pastrone's technical and artistic achievements in this film would have been possible without the money to pay for them. Hence with this triumph the Italian cinema exposed itself to emulation and eventually usurpation by a richer competitor. From then on what counted was not the national background or the natural setting but the magnitude of the sets and the impact of the big scenes. Pastrone's influence went beyond Griffith to Cecil B. DeMille and his imitators.»¹¹ World War I virtually ended Italian historical spectacles and relatively few were produced between 1920 and 1939, while the production of expensive epic films became the exclusive domain of Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s, reaching their peak in the 1960s.

Films such as *Cabiria*, which is set in the pre-Christian era of the Punic Wars (264-146 B.C.),¹² served purely nationalistic (as well as commercial and entertainment) aims. The struggle between Rome and Carthage for supremacy in the Mediterranean complemented the Italian nationalist view that Italy had a «civilizing» role to play in Africa, an idea articulated more forcefully later by Mussolini. Such films also harkened back to a period when Rome (i.e., Italy, as the film sought to convince its Italian audiences by equating the two very different states and societies) dominated the known world, a situation that modern Italian nationalists sought to restore, however unrealistic the goal.¹³

The direct comparison of Roman republican virtues to the political culture of Fascist Italy was most flagrantly depicted in Carmine Gallone's *Scipione l'Africano* (1937), an admiring portrayal of Scipio Africanus the Elder who defeated Hannibal and the Carthaginians at the Battle of Zama in 202 B.C. *Scipione* rehashes many of the same historical characters and events of *Cabiria*, made over twenty years earlier. Whereas *Cabiria* concentrated more on the interpersonal relations and conflicts that influenced the battles between the Romans and Carthaginians, *Scipione* devoted a great deal of attention and

considerable monetary resources to the battle scenes themselves. In addition, *Cabiria* was set almost entirely in Carthage, whereas *Scipione* is more preoccupied with contrasting the civic virtues of Rome with the despotic Carthaginian institutions.¹⁴ And *Scipione* was produced under the Fascist regime while *Cabiria* was one of the last spectacles produced in the prewar period.

Scipio Africanus is played by Annibale Ninchi (an ironic choice, considering his name) in a restrained yet heroic and avuncular style, enunciating extended and often florid monologues which slow down the pace of the film. The film's first scene clearly establishes the status of Scipio as a popular leader much like Mussolini. Adoring crowds hail him as he enters the Senate to urge that the Romans bring the war to Carthage itself so as to force Hannibal's army to abandon southern Italy and return to North Africa where he can be defeated. When he leaves the Senate after being named commander of the army, Scipio is fervently hailed by the populace. Sturdy yeoman farmers patriotically volunteer to join the legions. This contrasts with the Carthaginians who are despotically ruled by fear—the scene in which Hannibal (Camillo Pilotto) is introduced, starkly shows his soldiers cowering before him.

The climactic sequence of the Battle of Zama lasts some 20 minutes. The Italian military provided thousands of extras for both the Roman and Carthaginian armies. It is certainly an impressively choreographed battle with thousands of men engaged in hand-to-hand combat on foot, on horseback, and mounted on elephants. One war elephant is accompanied by her baby into battle and both are magnanimously spared by the Roman soldiers. In fact, there are several examples in the film of Roman humanitarianism as opposed to the barbarism of the Carthaginians, a trait that history shows the Romans greatly lacked.

After the triumph over Hannibal, the final scene shows Scipio back on his estate examining the wheat harvest and going about his business of being a farmer and a devoted family man. This denouement reinforces the image of Scipio as a simple citizen who answers his country's summons in a time of national danger, and when the enemy is vanquished returns to his civilian, republican life. Again, this was intended to represent Scipio as the Mussolini of his time, and conversely Mussolini as the protector of his nation in the tradition of the ancient Roman patriots.

As for Mussolini's reaction to *Scipione l'Africano*, the following account summarizes a visit he made to the set:

Mussolini had taken great pride in the film before its release, once visiting the set, where he was hailed with chants of «Duce, Duce» by a

costumed cast of thousands (many of whom were draftees for the Ethiopian campaign). And Carmine Gallone...was reported to have confided to some of his closest friends, «If the Duce doesn't like the film I'll shoot myself.» Mussolini was said to have been bored with the movie, and Gallone decided not to shoot himself.¹⁵

Although *Scipione* cost about 12.6 million lira, the most ever spent on an Italian film before the war, and its release was preceded by an extensive promotional campaign, it received lukewarm critical reaction both in the press and at the Venice Film Festival in 1937. And again in yet another parallelism with *Cabiria*, expensive historical films like *Scipione* were curtailed by Italy's involvement in World War II.

It is germane at this point to consider some fascinating factors influencing Mussolini's public image. Much is commented in the United States about the shaping of political candidates' personas by media consultants for television spots, and how American techniques and consultants are increasingly being used in other countries (e.g., in the 1996 elections in Israel, Spain, and Japan). It is, however, worth remembering that Mussolini and Hitler were also very media-oriented, primarily to the predominant mass media of the time—the press and newsreels. Mussolini's public histrionics were actually adopted from the Italian cinema of the 1920s, specifically from Maciste, a «strongman» film hero:

Mussolini's appearances in early Italian newsreels and documentaries (and his public personality in general) conjure a pedigree of acrobats and «strongmen» from 1920s Italian films...Maciste, the most famous of them all (although most of their films became popular throughout Europe), was, after all, an Italian success story; a dock worker, with no formal acting training, he became one of Italy's most celebrated heroes of the 1920s. Like these strongmen from the 1920s, Mussolini (whose own pseudonym, *Il Duce*, was not popularized until the late 1920s) was part of an ongoing *serial* of movie appearances to which were attached such epitaphs as Mussolini-aviator, Mussolini at the thresher, Mussolini-athlete, and so forth. His gestures, while they may have invoked the histrionics of artistic heroes such as D'Annunzio or Marinetti, were more consonant with the acting style of the heroes of silent film.¹⁶

Extensive footage exists of Mussolini in these various roles: in one he displays his physical prowess by running with Alpine troops, in another he is

bare-chested and gathering wheat from a thresher surrounded by admiring beautiful peasant girls from central casting, other footage shows him completing a speech and crossing his arms while with eyes closed he nods his head in a pompous gesture of self-satisfaction, and in perhaps the most famous, he reviews his troops standing in front of a statue of Augustus Caesar.

Mussolini's pipe dreams of reestablishing the Roman Empire ended of course with his ruinous alliance with Hitler and his ignominious end at the hands of Communist partisans who executed him, his mistress, and several associates, and suspended their mutilated corpses from a gas station in Milan. *Scipione l'Africano* was the last serious Italian filmic attempt to link modern Italy with ancient Rome. Postwar Italian cinema, especially in such classic neorealistic films as *Open City*, *Paisan*, and *Bicycle Thief* dealt self-critically with Italy's poverty and the prewar Fascist attitudes that had brought the country to ruin. Federico Fellini would later turn to ancient Rome for inspiration in his *Satyricon* (1969) to be more fully discussed below, but nothing conveys more starkly the break with Italy's cinematic past as this bizarre, almost otherworldly depiction of antiquity. Romans were not simply «earlier» Italians but truly an alien, strange society far removed from the modern world.¹⁷ Another postwar Italian genre which represents a continuation of sorts with the Maciste films of the 1920s is the «Hercules» films of the 1960s characterized by wooden acting and ludicrous English dubbing. Other films in this genre dealt with Rome but since they were low-budget «B» movies and not serious treatments of their topics but purely commercialist products, they will not be considered here.¹⁸

Post World War II Italian films, as a result of war and political upheaval, achieved new artistic levels and international prestige particularly with the neorealist movement which had a profound influence on filmmakers in other countries. But neorealism was also a reaction to the prewar Italian cinema's long tradition of grandiose historical spectacles and upper-class melodramas, genres that avoided dealing with the often grim realities of Italian society.

The production of historical epics had already been taken up by the emerging cinematic giant of Hollywood which with its superior financial resources and international appeal of its stars and films was poised to dominate the genre.

HOLLYWOOD ENTERS THE ARENA

The two acknowledged American masters of the historical epic film were D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille, although the most popular Roman spectacle motion picture of the pre-sound era was *Ben Hur* (1925), directed by Fred Niblo.

When the *peplums* moved to Hollywood, the genre came to express more universal themes than the Italian epics which often served the demands of Italian nationalism. The two periods in Roman history that Hollywood concentrated on were the 1st century B.C., and specifically the interlocked stories of Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, and Mark Antony. The intensely romantic tale of these individuals as well as their hubris has persisted through the ages, gaining renewed scrutinization during the Renaissance in works of art and then culminating with Shakespeare's popular tragedies, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, which popularized and preserved their memories through the centuries to our own era. The second period of interest for filmmakers is the 1st century A.D. which marked the birth of Christ and the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. The courage and piety of the early Christians moreover can be contrasted with some of the most deliciously sadistic and perverse Roman emperors, such as Nero, Caligula, and Commodus who have been interpreted in marvelously villainous and campy performances by actors of the caliber of Charles Laughton, Peter Ustinov, John Hurt, and Christopher Plummer. Invariably in these films the most enjoyable performances are those of the corrupt and murderous Roman emperors rather than the generally bland and uninteresting Christians and their sympathizers.

Although D.W. Griffith was influenced by the Italian films, he never made a film on ancient Rome. In 1913, he filmed *Judith of Bethulia* which was set in ancient Assyria, and *Intolerance* (1916) was in part set in Babylon. Griffith's classic *Birth of a Nation* (1915) was, of course, about the U.S. Civil War, but many of the innovative techniques he employed to film large numbers of extras in sweeping battle scenes were inspired by the Italian films, largely in how to more effectively stage and photograph such scenes.

Ben Hur had been a consistent favorite with the public, first as a novel by General Lew Wallace and then as a money-making stage production in 1899. The first film version was released in 1907 but its producer, the Kalem Co., was sued by both the publishers of the book and the producers of the stage production even though motion picture rights did not yet exist. As a result, in 1911, Kalem withdrew all copies of the film from exhibition losing \$25,000 in the process. This legal imbroglio led to the introduction of motion picture rights. The Goldwyn Company quickly obtained the rights to *Ben Hur*, and signed Francis X. Bushman to play Messala, Ramón Novarro as Ben Hur, and Fred Niblo to direct. The sweeping story of the Judean aristocrat who is arrested for treason by his erstwhile friend, the Roman governor, was an ideal vehicle for the screen (although one is left to wonder how a sea battle and the famous chariot race were brought off in the stage production). The chariot race was shot in Italy and, to get the most realism, the director encouraged the drivers to run a real

race with bonuses to the winners. As a result both men and horses were run to exhaustion with numerous pileups. It is believed that more than a hundred horses were killed in the filming of the chariot race with many of the chariot crashes being left in the final editing. *Ben Hur* was premiered in New York on December 30, 1925, and was a «resounding success»; this was to be the last pre-talkie historical costume spectacle.¹⁹

Cecil B. DeMille was probably more influential than Griffith in shaping the structure of the classic Hollywood narrative film which remains dominant to this day. Although most of his films were about contemporary topics, DeMille enjoyed great success with *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *King of Kings* (1927), which demonstrated his mastery of the historical epic. In 1932, he made *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), a hit that combined the successful box-office themes of Christian piety and Roman decadence. The film featured such memorable scenes as Claudette Colbert as the empress Poppaea bathing in donkey milk²⁰ and Charles Laughton as an unforgettably campy Nero who is alternately petulantly childlike and sadistic.²¹ The film also features an impressively accurate sequence in the arena in which most of the types of bloody activities that took place during the Roman games are depicted: combats between men and wild beasts, fights between female warriors and pygmies, gladiatorial combats, and finally, the casting of the Christians to the lions (although no specific record of this actually occurring exists, it is known that criminals were sentenced to the arena to be killed by wild animals).

Even though many Hollywood films of the early 1930s were surprisingly candid in their sexuality, DeMille seems to have been testing the limits in *The Sign of the Cross*. During the scenes of death and mutilation in the arena, he cuts to a woman in the stands obviously becoming sexually aroused at the carnage below (a reaction that was common during the actual games). DeMille keeps cutting to reaction shots of the crowds which convincingly convey the barbarism of such «games.» And the centerpiece is Nero who seems bored most of the time and munches on grapes while men, women, and animals are dying a few feet away from where he sits.

A quite suprising scene takes place in the home of the prefect Marcus (Fredric March) where he has taken the Christian girl Merlia (Elissa Landi). An orgiastic party is underway and Antaria (Joyselle Joyner), the «most wicked and talented woman in Rome,» sings a ditty called «The Naked Moon» to Merlia while slinking around her making obvious lesbian advances. This eroticism harks back to the early Italian epics whose *dive* (female stars) «brought an element of eroticism that pervaded all aspects of the film: in their dramatic gestures, in their often scanty costumes...where [the films'] sexual appeal emanated from a 'forbidden fruit' attitude toward the pagan and primitive settings.»²² The

commercial and entertainment value of juxtaposing Rome's sinfulness with the Christians' purity was irresistible and DeMille took full advantage of it. After all, the audience had to be shown just how depraved the Romans were in order for Christian sacrifice and redemption to have real significance, «...a suggestion that sex is irresistibly appealing but morally unedifying. Mixing titillation with guilt, DeMille, a deeply religious man, was seriously concerned with giving his audience a good show as well as enforcing a moral lesson.»²³

DeMille next filmed the story of the doomed lovers, Cleopatra and Mark Antony in *Cleopatra* (1934). The seductive Egyptian queen was played by Claudette Colbert and her Roman swain by the English actor Henry Wilcoxon, a mainstay of historical costume dramas. Since this story takes place in the pre-Christian era, DeMille presented the story as one of doomed love complicated by blind ambition. Of course, few moviegoers except for the scant number of historians among them, understood or cared about the complex and momentous issues over which the civil war between Octavian Caesar on one side and Mark Antony and Cleopatra on the other was fought. The emphasis was on sex as the sultry Cleopatra (no milk baths this time!) worked her wiles on the naïve Antony. The film begins with the famous (and authentic) incident when the teen-age Cleopatra had herself delivered to Julius Caesar rolled up in a rug and ends with her dying from the bite of a poisonous asp. There is an interesting scene which illustrates the observation that «...images of the past in popular movies reveal more about the present, i.e., about their audiences, than about the past, or about the people who lived in the past.»²⁴ Roman aristocrats are gossiping about Mark Antony's affair with Cleopatra and one of the women asks «Is she black?» The men snicker both at the ridiculousness of such a notion and the obvious ignorance of the woman who asked. Although this dialogue reflected modern biases and not necessarily Roman attitudes, it is also of interest to consider it in light of current Afrocentric claims that the ancient Egyptians were «black».²⁵

Except for Colbert, who was French-born but spoke standard American English, most of the other actors in *Cleopatra* were British. This introduces the issue of dialogue in the historical epics: Finding a convincing voice for ancient and historical characters has always been a problem in Hollywood when American and foreign actors have been employed in mixed casts. It is no accident that, to American audiences, British actors with their classical theatrical training have always sounded more natural playing Roman characters. American speech sounds too «contemporary» and generally unconvincing. I vaguely recall an otherwise forgettable (and forgotten) film made for television of some years ago about some aspect of Roman history in which the eminent but extremely New Yorkese-sounding actor, Jack Warden, played a Roman senator.

And since others in the cast were British, the whole effect was ludicrous in the extreme. But it is undeniable that British actors always seem more natural wearing a toga or Roman armor, perhaps because of the association with Shakespeare or even that the British accent sounds more «imperial» than the American. But to the end of the Hollywood Roman costume drama, the problem was never quite resolved. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) featured Alec Guinness, Stephen Boyd, Christopher Plummer, and Sophia Loren—an interesting and somewhat incompatible mix of accents. The 1963 *Cleopatra* had the very American-sounding Elizabeth Taylor in the title role costarring the British actors Richard Burton as Antony and Rex Harrison as Caesar. It was only in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960) that this incongruity between American and British speech was used to dramatic advantage.

Except for *Roman Scandals* (1933), a musical starring Eddie Cantor, Hollywood did not show much interest in Roman and other ancient themes for the duration of the 1930s and DeMille's two films essentially constituted the principal productions of the genre. The Great Depression and the increasingly threatening international situation made U.S. audiences turn to more escapist entertainment (Shirley Temple and Fred Astaire musicals) and dramatic fare such as the gangster movies of Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, and Humphrey Bogart which reflected a certain recognition of social problems but were mainly exciting action movies. The ancient world did not hold much interest for American moviegoers of the 1930s, and certainly even less during World War II when Hollywood movies principally supported the war effort.

It was during the Eisenhower era of the 1950s that the Hollywood historical epic regained favor. It was a conservative period and the Hollywood epic presents an essentially conservative view of the ancient world.²⁶ The United States was now the strongest and wealthiest nation in the world, challenged only by the Soviet Union. Many Americans saw themselves as the successors to the British Empire which was often referred to as the greatest empire since the Roman. Perhaps also the struggle with atheistic Communism made the inspiring stories of the early Christians' martyrdom under the brutal, pagan Romans more marketable to audiences. Curiously, on the one hand Americans could identify with the military and political power of the Romans and the perils faced by that civilization. Those Americans who worried about Communist infiltration pointed to the barbarian penetration of the empire's borders; concern about moral decay was compared with the decline of the Roman aristocracy and, consequently, the fall of Rome which held lessons for the United States. And most Americans could be inspired by the embattled Christians whose creed eventually triumphed over the empire. Also new film technologies, such as improved Technicolor and wide-angle cameras, were

tailor-made to enhance the qualities of the movie spectacular. Besides, producers could go to an impoverished Europe and shoot in authentic locations using thousands of cheaply hired extras.

Preceding Hollywood's production of Roman costume spectaculars in the 1950s was a curious British effort in 1948: *Caesar and Cleopatra* directed by Gabriel Pascal and based on the play by George Bernard Shaw. It is believed to be the most expensive film ever made in Britain. Unfortunately, «those who liked the Shaw play thought the movie was too lavish, and those who liked epics did not go for Shaw's play, so the movie never really made it.»²⁷ Yet with a magnificent cast led by Claude Rains, Vivien Leigh, and Stewart Granger emoting Shaw's witty and urbane dialogue, the film was highly satisfying and certainly devoid of the accent problems mentioned previously and which would shortly be presenting problems for Hollywood. The film tells of Julius Caesar's first meeting with Cleopatra and his mediation and then embroilment in the civil war between the teen-age queen and her brother. Michael Grant, the eminent historian of Rome, criticizes the film for implying in its last scene that Caesar and Cleopatra did not meet again after Alexandria. «It is ironical», he writes, «that we have quite detailed information about the Alexandrian street-fighting of the previous years, but none at all about the queen's stay at Rome, although it must have been one of the most significant periods of her career.»²⁸ What must have been a grandiose spectacle for the residents of Rome was recreated in an equally grand manner in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963), in which Elizabeth Taylor played the title role.

The golden age of Hollywood Roman epics was initiated with Mervyn Le Roy's sumptuous production of *Quo Vadis?* in 1951. Starring Robert Taylor, Deborah Kerr, and Peter Ustinov as Nero, the «filmed result [was] a glorious piece of entertainment, full of ludicrous dialogue, sumptuous photography...action, spectacle, romance.» Again, the most enjoyable performance was by Ustinov playing the mad emperor, effortlessly stealing every scene in which he appeared; he sabotages the film with his «campy, strutting, vaudevillian performance...all but dismantling the inspirational themes.»²⁹ The plot was much like that of *The Sign of the Cross* in that a Roman soldier falls in love with a Christian girl; however, in Le Roy's version they do not both perish in the arena as in DeMille's tragic but inspirational climactic scene but a happy ending ensues after a spectacular scene in the arena where Deborah Kerr is saved from a killer bull, and Robert Taylor exhorts the crowd to rise up against Nero who flees and commits suicide.

A modest black and white filmed version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was made in 1953 by Joseph L. Mankiewicz who in 1963 would make the infinitely more lavish *Cleopatra*. James Mason as Brutus gave the best

performance although the box-office draw Marlon Brando as Mark Antony received top billing. Again, it was the classically trained British actors like Mason and John Gielgud who dominated the cast. The film featured a brief low-budget *Battle of Philippi* in which a small force of Antony's troops ambush the remarkably unsuspecting army of Brutus and the other assassins.

This second phase of Hollywood epic films was prompted by a similar motive as the first in 1915-1927—to draw the public away from a rival medium. In the silent film era it was the theater, and the films of D.W. Griffith and *Ben Hur* convincingly demonstrated that the cinema could literally have the world as its stage and not be hobbled by the limitations of the theater (even if dialogue was absent). In the 1950s, the new competitor was television and Hollywood was seeking to draw audiences away from the new medium with Technicolor and wide-screen epics. The first Cinemascope production was *The Robe* (1953), directed by Henry Koster and starring Richard Burton and Jean Simmons as the perennial Roman soldier who falls in love with a Christian girl and, again, true to form, Jay Robinson's portrayal of Caligula was the most enjoyable element in this otherwise plodding film.

Demetrius and the Gladiators was made in 1954 as a sequel to *The Robe* and the following year an amusing oddity, *Jupiter's Darling*, presented a MGM musical version of Hannibal's invasion of Italy, starring Esther Williams and the baritone Howard Keel, as the Carthaginian nemesis of Rome. I only recall the catchy chorus from the film: «Oh, Hannibal, Oh Hannibal, Oh great and mighty Hannibal—ON TO ROME!» The spectacular remake of *Ben Hur* (1950) brought the favorite silent screen classic to a new generation, modernized with Technicolor, wide-screen projection, sumptuous sets, and the classic centerpiece of the film—the chariot race between *Ben Hur* (Charlton Heston) and Messala (Stephen Boyd).

In 1960 Kirk Douglas produced and played the title role in *Spartacus*, «...still regarded as the most intelligent of all the epics.»³⁰ Adapted from the homonymous novel by Howard Fast, the film makes a very pointed leftist political statement. In telling the story of the gladiator who led a massive servile revolt in 73-71 B.C. that for a time seemed to threaten the Roman state itself, *Spartacus* draws a sharp distinction between the decadent aristocrats, epitomized by Laurence Olivier as Crassus, and the «people» represented by the plain-spoken forthrightness of Kirk Douglas as Spartacus who «speaks in an unaffected, energetic American manner while...Olivier intones his oration in glorious English diction.»³¹ This was one of the few occasions in Hollywood Roman epics in which the difference between American and British diction was used to effectively contrast social divisions. With the screenplay written by the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo and the direction by Stanley Kubrick, the film comes

across as a populist epic in which Spartacus is a natural leader whose political and social ideas are in direct opposition to the decadent and corrupt Roman ruling classes. The slave camp is portrayed as an egalitarian, proto-communist society in which the able-bodied willingly support the weaker ones. Kirk Douglas said about the film: «I'm very proud of *Spartacus*. It's difficult to make a big epic picture in which the characters stand out, and I think the actors dominated the film.»³² But epic it still was—the final battle in which Spartacus's slave army is defeated was filmed in Spain where 8,000 soldiers from Generalissimo Franco's army portrayed Roman legionnaires and slave rebels. The greatest historical inaccuracy in the film is the fate of Spartacus who is shown crucified, Christ-like, whereas he actually died in the final battle and his body was never recovered.³³

The much ballyhooed *Cleopatra* (1963) signaled the end of the Hollywood Roman epics, because of its excessive \$40 million budget (adjusted for inflation, it is still thought to be the most expensive film ever made). The film attracted more attention because of Elizabeth Taylor's very public affair with co-star Richard Burton. Although the final product was generally not well received critically, the film does much to salvage Cleopatra's much maligned historical reputation. Taylor plays the Egyptian queen as a strong woman and crafty politician who was trying to prevent her country from being swallowed by the Roman juggernaut. The well-documented events are accurately portrayed, especially Cleopatra's visit to Rome; although no account of this visit exists (for reasons already stated), the grand spectacle of the Hollywood depiction probably did not do justice to the actual event, given the fabulous wealth of eastern monarchs and their excessive flaunting of it. Antony's weakness of will and predilection for Greek culture and attire (for which he was criticized by his enemies in Rome) is also portrayed, as well as the strong Greek influence in the Egyptian court of the Ptolemys. Although a flawed film, *Cleopatra* cannot be faulted on its historical accuracy.³⁴

BEYOND HOLLYWOOD: THE LAST ROMAN EPICS

In 1959 Samuel Bronston, a Hollywood producer, went to Spain to shoot *John Paul Jones*. He decided to stay and create a «second Hollywood» by filming a series of «superproductions» financed by both Spanish and international banks. Bronston built the sets for his films on 250 acres he rented near Las Matas, about 20 kilometers north of Madrid. Here he shot *El Cid*, *55 Days in Peking*, and «the not-quite-but-nearest-to-being-definitive Roman epic,»³⁵ *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). Directed by Anthony Mann and starring Alec Guinness, Sophia Loren, Stephen Boyd, and Christopher Plummer

as the mad emperor Commodus, the film supposedly depicted events during the reigns of Marcus Aurelius (Alec Guinness) and his son and successor Commodus. The topic was unusual because it was not the time period favored by Hollywood producers, the 1st century B.C. through the 1st century A.D., and thus the emperors were unfamiliar to the general public. Marcus Aurelius reigned from 161 to 180 A.D. and Commodus from 180 to 192. Even more unusual, it is based very freely on Edward Gibbon's classic 18th century work, *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the introductory voice-over was written by the historian Will Durant.³⁶ The film makes a worthy effort to show Marcus Aurelius as a devoted, intelligent, and self-sacrificing public servant whose goal of strengthening the empire was about to be realized when he was struck down by a fever in his camp near Vienna. In its general outlines *The Fall* is faithful to history: Marcus did spend most his reign at war with the barbarians trying to stabilize the northern frontiers. His wooden fortress, set in a snow-bound mountain forest «looks wonderfully unfamiliar, its wood-lined rooms serving as a novel kind of epic backdrop.»³⁷ This unusual set was outdone by a dazzling reconstruction of Roman architecture, particularly the Forum, which was the largest three-dimensional set ever made and which was populated by most of the residents of Las Matas. The fabulous sets overwhelmed the weak script and indifferent performances, with the exception of Christopher Plummer's portrayal of the corrupt Commodus. The depiction of his preference for the company of gladiators and his own predilection for fighting in the arena was accurate enough, although not the manner of his death.³⁸

Nonetheless, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* makes an effort to pose a profound historical question on complex events and challenges the viewer to consider it as the film progresses. The unequivocal conclusion is that the conditions that led to the disintegration of Roman civilization had their origins in the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus—a questionable proposition and one that not many historians would accept. Thus the film remains not only one of the most visually spectacular epics, but also one of the most intellectually interesting.

Federico Fellini, the great Italian director, tried his hand at making a film set in ancient Rome and created something entirely different from the Hollywood and old Italian Roman epics. Loosely based on the work of the Roman author Petronius Arbiter, *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969) is a film that in the words of one Italian critic «bears absolutely no relationship to the Rome we learned about in school books. It is a place outside historical time, an area of the unconscious in which the episodes related by Petronius are relived among the ghosts of Fellini.»³⁹ Although set during the reign of Nero, the film makes no effort at historical accuracy, as Fellini himself asserted. Even the assassination of «the

tyrant»—presumably Nero—takes place on a barren island and the victim is a feminine-like youth rather than the historical Nero whose physical appearance is well documented.

Fellini's own statements on what he was trying to achieve in *Satyricon* were contradictory and elusive. At one point he asserted that he was attempting an analogy between ancient Rome and contemporary society, and another time he denied this: «A voyage into total obscurity! An unknown planet for me to populate!» Whatever his motives, Fellini created, perhaps unintentionally, a «post-Hollywood epic» in which the conventions of the American interpretation are rejected. It also reflects Italy's postwar status—no longer a country with imperial or military aspirations but a more prosperous society in which Fellini discerns moral and spiritual decay. «From a pre-Christian to a post-Christian one: Christ has disappeared and we've got to get along without him. This is the relevance of the film to today,» Fellini averred in one of his many inconsistent statements on *Satyricon*.⁴⁰

NONTRADITIONAL FILMS ON ROME

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1966) provided a much more benign look at ancient Rome, and reminded audiences that many forms of the humor we enjoy today were originally concocted by Roman playwrights. Rather than half-mad emperors, power-hungry generals, and self-sacrificing Christians, **A Funny Thing** showed that the ancient Romans enjoyed slapstick, laughed at female impersonators and henpecked husbands, ridiculed self-infatuated braggart warriors, and roared at «...the dirty old man who runs after maidens with only the dimmest memory of what's to be done should he actually catch one.» Originally presented on Broadway in 1962, the musical was based on the works of Maccius Plautus (ca. 254 BC) and starred Zero Mostel in both the stage and film versions as the crafty slave who manipulates a stable of now-standard comic characters to gain his freedom and reunites two young lovers.⁴¹

The definitive and most recent Roman epic has to be the 1976 BBC television production of «*I, Claudius*» based on the novels of Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, in turn inspired by Suetonius and Tacitus. Starring Derek Jacoby as Claudius and John Hurt as a magnificently depraved and insane Caligula, the thirteen-hour series is filled with memorable moments, many which are too incredible to be fiction. Such a one is the incident, documented by Suetonius, when Claudius, who fancied himself a performer, summoned three senators at midnight to the palace. Arriving «half-dead with fear,» they were conducted to a stage upon which Caligula «suddenly burst»

and performed a song and dance at the conclusion of which he abruptly disappeared. This incident is hilariously recreated by John Hurt except that Claudius is one of the dignitaries summoned. The series attempts no broad historical conclusions, even though, as Michael Grant says, the «...period...is one of the most important, critical, and formative in the history of the western world.»⁴² The television series, like the novels, focuses totally on personal relationships and palace politics emerging ultimately as the portrait of a highly dysfunctional family.

Bob Guccione, publisher of *Penthouse*, produced a *Caligula* in 1980 that visually owed much to Fellini's *Satyricon*. He assembled an impressive but misused cast, including Malcolm MacDowell as Caligula, Peter O'Toole as Tiberius, John Gielgud as Nerva, and Helen Mirren as Caesonia, Caligula's wife. What made this film quite different is that Guccione took what DeMille and previous filmmakers only suggested, albeit unambiguously, about Roman decadence and carried it to its «logical» conclusion: he filmed graphic sexual sequences and interjected them in the film. Otherwise the film had Fellini-like scenes in which Rome's nightlife is populated by bizarre characters of varied sexual orientations. However, the character development is limited to an obsession with sex (true, according to Suetonius) and rarely does the film attempt to go beyond that.

The British Monty Python group produced a parody of Hollywood Roman/Christian/Biblical epics with the highly irreverent *Life of Brian* (1979). Brian, born just down the block at the same time as Jesus, goes through his life continually being mistaken for the messiah. In the process, a totally insane group of Romans, Jewish nationalists, and proto-Christians are slashed with the barbed Pythonian wit. For example, in one scene the Jewish nationalists are meeting in the stands of an all but empty arena in which a couple of forlorn gladiators chase each other around. In the seats, the few young spectators attest to this being a «Children's Matinee.» In this way, the film conveys the inhumanity and moral desolation of the Roman world. And the constant bickering between rival Jewish revolutionary groups reflects the historical state of rebelliousness and conflict with the concomitant succession of «messiahs» that characterized Palestine in the 1st century A.D.

CONCLUSION

Since *Cleopatra* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* in the 1960s no historical spectacles based on ancient themes, Roman or otherwise, have been produced by Hollywood or in any other country. One reason is of course economics. It is simply no longer economically feasible to hire thousands of

extras and clothe them in Roman armor and/or togas and build full-size outdoor sets of ancient cities. In the 1950s and 1960s it was still possible to go to Italy or Spain and obtain thousands of extras, often by hiring military units as was done in the previously mentioned battle sequence in *Spartacus* which used 8,000 Spanish soldiers. In the 1970s and 1980s, some producers went to Eastern Europe where depressed economies made it possible to hire extras at bargain rates. In 1996, Mel Gibson used units of the Irish army to film his large battle sequence for *Braveheart*.

But aside from economics, the absence of films on ancient Rome is based on a change in public taste and mass culture. Hollywood films have, since the late 1960s, reflected the rise of the young audience which preferred films more relevant to the political and cultural changes that the United States, along with most Western and non-Western countries, was undergoing as a result of the Vietnam war and the rise of the counterculture. Young people are generally focused on the present, on their own life experiences, and lack a historical perspective. In the 1990s, popular culture, overwhelmingly based on youth demographics and economics, is subject to ever more rapidly changing influences and short-lived trends. Hollywood productions reflect this social evolution by relying more and more on computerized special effects «action» films with practically nil social and historical relevance. This has been paralleled by a lowering of educational standards in which history of whatever period has been deemphasized thus producing a current generation even more ignorant of important historical mileposts than previous ones. At least in the past, Cecil B. DeMille or Anthony Mann could impress upon audiences some awareness of ancient history, of Caesar and Cleopatra, of Nero and Caligula. In this way, the brief exposure to history that most people received in their secondary education was reinforced, that these personages represented a civilization upon which our modern world is derived. As Robert Rosenstone writes, «...it is surely no exaggeration to insist that for the mass audience this task of connecting the individual to the historical is better handled by the historical film than the scholarly monograph—or any other kind of written history.»⁴³

As we approach the end of the two millenniums that began with the Roman world, there is perhaps a postmodern attitude that the past is irrelevant to the rapidly approaching 21st century. The great conflicts of the 20th century based on ideology and antiquated nationalisms have been swept into «the dustbin of history.» There is a tendency for many in the United States and other countries to be inward-looking, to reject internationalism. This has been reflected in a renewed interest in or regression to localism and ethnicity. The success of *Braveheart* is a case in point: Hollywood invested in a film that celebrates Scottish resistance to English imperialism (the opposite of 1930s and

1940s movies which glorified the «civilizing» mission of the British Empire). Concurrently, non-Western parts of the world are assuming ever more political and economic importance, and will loom larger in the new millennium.

The 1997 revival of George Lucas's classic *Star Wars* (1977) suggests another change in youth-oriented mass culture. The original *Star Wars* trilogy was based on many conventional narrative and mythic themes used in both historical and western films. Many observers have commented that *Star Wars* changed Hollywood filmmaking and coopted traditional themes by presenting them in a new type of epic format more acceptable to current generational tastes. Considered with the «*Star Trek*» television and film series, such futuristic films recycle many of the themes of historical epics: the struggle between good and evil, the hero's quest for justice and/or identity, «evil» empires, and many others. It seems reasonable then to assume that these traditional themes have and will continue to be recast as science-fiction epics.

All of the above complex social and political currents are reflected in the great mass entertainment media, particularly the movies. Fortunately, the films of the past are now more accessible than ever in the form of videos, and can be used to supplement the teaching of history to a generation that is the most responsive to the visual media, both film and television. Although it is unlikely that a mass taste for the historical epic film will ever come back, in Hollywood or elsewhere, the old films can be used as yet one more tool to transmit the history of civilization to future generations.⁴⁴

NOTES AND REFERENCES

(1) As an example of the lingering historical associations with Rome, a Mexican writer looked back on the making and unmaking of emperors by the Praetorian Guard in the later Roman Empire and compared it to the history of military coups in Latin America. Referring to the Romans as «super Latin Americans,» she wrote: «Santa Anna and all the generals and colonels of Central and South America together pale before the members of the Praetorian Guard who, among other ignoble actions, sold or auctioned off the office of emperor.» CALDERÓN, Renata. «Los romanos eran superlatinoamericanos,» *Contenido*, Mexico City (May 1972): 66-70.

(2) Asterix, a popular comic book character in France, is a spunky little Gaul who continually bests the Romans. He has appeared in the following animated films, apparently the rare instance of ancient themes in French cinema: *Asterix le Gaulois* (1967), *Asterix et Cleopatre* (1968), *Les Douze travaux d'Asterix* (1975), *Asterix et la surprise de Cesar* (1985), *Asterix chez les Bretons* (1986), *Asterix et le coup du menhir*

(1989), and, curiously, a German animated film with English dialogue, *Asterix Conquers America* (1994). Mexican cinema made its contribution to the Roman genre with a comedy, *La vida íntima de Marco Antonio y Cleopatra* (1946), directed by Roberto Gavaldón. GARCÍA RIERA, Emilio. *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, volume 3. Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1971, pp. 136-137. A minor, low-budget Spanish film set in Roman times is *Los cántabros* (1980) written and directed by Paul Naschy aka Jacinto Molina.

(3) The term *peplum* was first applied in the 1960s by many French critics who held the genre in high regard. The term «sword 'n' sandal epics» is usually applied to the English-dubbed, low-budget Italian films produced in the 1960s on historical and mythological themes. LUCANIO, Patrick. *With Fire and Sword: Italian Spectacles on American Screens, 1958-1968*. Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1994, p. 12.

(4) The films are listed in VERDONE, Mario. «Preistoria del film storico,» *Il film storico italiano e lua su influenza sugli altri paesi*. Rome: Centro Sperimentale de Cinematografia, 1963, p. 107: *La presa di Roma* (1905, Alberini), *Ero e Leandro* (1909, Prod. Ambrosio), *Caio Gracco Tribuno* (1911, Latium Film), *Il conte Ugolino* (1908, Italia Film), *Il Cid* (1910, Prods. Cines with A. Noveoli), *Agnese Visconti* (1910, G. Pasteone), *Cristoforo Colombo* (1910), *La caduta di Troia* (1910-11, G. Pastrone), *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1910-11, Caserini), *Quo Vadis?* (1912, Guazzoni), *Cabiria* (1913-14, G. Pastrone), *Giulio Cesare* (1914, Guazzoni), *Fabiola* (1917-18, Guazzoni), *La Gerusalemme liberata* (1918, Guazzoni), *Messalina* (1923, Guazzoni), *Christus* (1915, G. Antamoro), *Theodora* (1919, L. Carlucci), *La nave* (1920, Gabriellino d'Annunzio), and *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1926, Palermi e Gallone).

(5) HAY, James. *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy: The Passing of the Rex*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1987, p. 158.

(6) *The Italian Cinema*, translated from the French by Roger Greaves and Oliver Stallybrass. New York and Washington, D.C.: Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 30.

(7) *Ibid*, p. 8.

(8) *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy*, p. 150. Both Hollywood and British films dealing with World War II frequently contained disparaging references to Italian military capabilities. A Spanish film, Carlos Saura's *Ay, Carmela* (1990), set in the Spanish Civil War, satirizes the uneasy relations between Spanish and Italian Fascists. Three Republican entertainers are captured and taken to a town that is occupied by Spanish Nationalists and their Italian allies. An Italian officer intercedes because he wants to put on a show for the troops and needs the services of the experienced performers. The officer had been a producer in civilian life and obviously has no military aptitude. He sings an amusing rendition of a jingoistic song about the Ethiopian campaign which contains lyrics such as «dusky maiden I will make you Roman» as his chorus of Alpine soldiers prances in the background. At this spectacle, a Spanish officer comments that the Italians «are a bunch of fags.»

Lamerica (1994), an Italian film directed by Gianni Amelio, takes to task Italian attitudes toward the Albanians. The opening credits are scrolled to Italian newsreels on the occupation of Albania in 1939 which bombastically and condescendingly proclaim the «awe» of the Albanians at the martial magnificence of Italian troops, and how the Italians

will bring modern progress to this benighted little country. Of course, the newsreel, being for domestic consumption, was designed to raise the self-esteem and morale of Italians. The film is about two Italian con men who want to set up a dummy company in poverty-stricken Albania of the early 1990s; they arrive in the country reflecting the same attitudes expressed in the 1939 Fascist newsreel.

(9) LEPROHON, Pierre. *The Italian Cinema*, p. 16.

(10) *Ibid*, p. 28.

(11) *Ibid*, p. 29.

(12) Specifically there were three Punic wars: the first in 264-241 B.C., the second in 218-201 B.C., and the third in 146 B.C. The second Punic war is the best known by the general public because of Hannibal's invasion of Italy; the third was hardly a war at all but a genocide characterized by the utter destruction of the defenseless city of Carthage.

(13) «For instance, in 1933 Mussolini installed four large marble maps in Rome along the grandiose, newly built Avenue of the Empire to illustrate the extent of the Roman empire in ancient history; the fourth map showed the empire in Trajan's time stretching from Britain to Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt. Here, in front of these glorious symbols of the past and possible future, he had the photographers take his picture wearing a newly designed steel helmet—with statues of the Caesars in the background.» SMITH, Dennis Mack. *Mussolini*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982, p. 184.

(14) HAY, *Popular Film in Fascist Italy*, p. 157.

(15) *Ibid*, pp. 155-156.

(16) *Ibid*, p. 226.

(17) HIRSCH, Foster. *The Hollywood Epic*. South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes & Co.; London: The Tantivy Press, 1978, p. 52

(18) Another interesting postwar change in Italian cinema was the rise to international stardom of such earthy actresses like Anna Magnani and a host of other beautiful but more «typically» Italian or Mediterranean types like Gina Lollobrigida and Sophia Loren. This contrasted with the prewar Italian genre of the «white telephone» or «middle class» films which featured actors with a more «northern European» appearance which probably reflected Mussolini's and his nationalist forebears' obsession with characterizing Italians as an «aryan» people, at least northern Italians. There has been a long-standing cultural and economic division between northern Italy and the regions at the tip of the peninsula—Naples, Calabria, and Sicily. Northerners disparagingly refer to southerners as «Africans» and in the 1990s a Tuscan-based separatist movement calling itself the Northern League is calling for a separation of the north and south into two countries.

(19) MUNN, Mike. *The Stories Behind the Scenes of the Great Epic Films*. London: Illustrated Publications, 1982, pp. 7-9.

(20) «...the milk was heavily loaded with lard or imitation cream, and soon stank to high heaven under the hot studio lights.» EDELSON, Edward. *Great Movie Spectaculars*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., p. 24.

(21) Asked by a reporter about his interpretation of Nero, Laughton replied, «Nero was nuts. I play him straight.» HIGHAM, Charles. *Cecil B. DeMille*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973, p. 216.

(22) *Popular Film in Fascist Italy*, p. 151.

- (23) HIRSCH, *The Hollywood Epic*, p. 18.
- (24) *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy*, p. 155.
- (25) Such ideas, including the ones that Socrates, Hannibal, and Cleopatra were black and that the Greeks stole all their science and philosophy from the Egyptians, are being promulgated by certain Afrocentric academics and actually being taught in some U.S. school districts. The basic Afrocentric text in which some of these theories were originally advanced is BERNAL, Martin. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, 2 vols. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987. The main critique of Bernal's theories is LEFKOWITZ, Mary R. and ROGERS, Guy MacLean. *Black Athena Revisited*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- (26) «The Hollywood epic...depicts the ancient world in traditional ways, through a set of visual conventions inherited from Victorian paintings and stage design, and from the early Italian epics and those of Griffith and DeMille.» HIRSCH, *The Hollywood Epic*, p. 32.
- (27) EDELSON, *Great Movie Spectaculars*, pp. 32-33.
- (28) GRANT, Michael. *Cleopatra*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972, p. 87. Roman historians during and after the reign of Augustus Caesar ignored the visit of Cleopatra to Rome with Caesar's son, Caesarion, even though she was in the city when Caesar was assassinated. A classic instance of the victors trying to write the losing side out of their version of history. To no avail because knowledge of Cleopatra's extraordinary life persisted through the Middle Ages and was resuscitated by Shakespeare and the cinema, although the negative image that her Roman enemies propagated about her did come down through history.
- (29) *The Hollywood Epic*, p. 69.
- (30) MUNN, *The Stories Behind*, p. 69.
- (31) *he Hollywood Epic*, p. 98.
- (32) *The Stories Behind*, p. 72.
- (33) Although Spartacus is presented as a hero in 20th century film and literature, he was anything but that to the Romans who lived in terror of servile revolt, just as Western Hemisphere slaveowners did in the 18th and 19th centuries. Contemporary and later Roman historians were little interested in the details of the life of a slave so we have few facts about the life of Spartacus. The Australian novelist, Colleen McCullough in the third book of her series on ancient Rome, *Fortune's Favorites*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1993, claims to tell the «true story» of Spartacus for modern readers, although she does not provide any sources. Briefly, she writes that Spartacus was born in Campania and was a farmer and Roman citizen. He enlisted at the age of 17 in Marcus Crassus's «legion» recruited for Sulla. He rose to the rank of military tribune in one of Sulla's veteran legions but became insubordinate and was tried for mutiny. Spartacus chose to become a gladiator. He was shipped to Batiatus's gladiatorial school after killing an opponent in the arena (professional gladiators were trained at considerable expense to their owners and usually, in this period, did not fight to the death). The uprising he organized was not due to one incident. He planned to join Quintus Sertorius in Spain but after the latter's death, Spartacus decided to go to Sicily. He was killed in battle and 6,000 of his followers were crucified in 70 B.C. (p. 661).

- (34) For details on the filming and budgetary contretemps, see EDELSON, *Great Movie Spectaculars*, pp. 125-134.
- (35) *The Stories Behind*, p. 84.
- (36) SALMI, Hannu. «Film as Historical Narrative», *Film-Historia*, Vol. V, No. 1 (1995): 48.
- (37) *The Hollywood Epic*, p. 32.
- (38) For an account of Samuel Bronston's movie ventures in Spain, see BESAS, Peter. *Behind the Spanish Lens: Spanish Cinema under Fascism and Democracy*. Denver: Arden Press, Inc., 1985, pp. 53-67.
- (39) Giovanni Grazzini quoted in FAVA, Claudio G. and VIGANO, Aldo. *The Films of Federico Fellini*, translated by Shula Curto. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1981, p. 135.
40. Murray, Edward. *Fellini the Artist*, 2d edition. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1985, pp. 177-189.
- (41) GELBART, Larry. «The Funny Thing Was, How Old Humor Is», *The New York Times*, April 7, 1996, Internet edition.
- (42) Suetonius Tranquillus, Gaius. *The Twelve Caesars*, translated by Robert Graves, revised with an introduction by Michael Grant. London: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 9. The previous quotes are from p. 180. Alexander Korda initiated a film based on Graves's novels in 1937 starring Charles Laughton as Claudius. The project was abandoned when Merle Oberon, the leading lady, was injured in a car crash.
- (43) ROSENSTONE, Robert A. «Editorial», *Film-Historia*, Vol. V, No. 1 (1995): 2. See also, idem, «The Historical Film as Real History», *ibid.*, pp. 5-23.
44. For a discussion on combining historical films with the teaching of history, see ATTREED, Lorraine and POWERS, James F. «Lessons in the Dark: Teaching the Middle Ages with Film», *Perspectives, American Historical Association Newsletter* (January 1997): 11-16; and INCLÁN, Luis. «Uso didáctico de dos versiones de *Los últimos días de Pompeya*», *Film-Historia*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (1994): 223-236. A new book on Roman historical films is ESPAÑA, Rafael de. *El Peplum. La Antigüedad en el cine*. Barcelona: Glénat, 1997.

Carl J. MORA is Ph. D. and Professor of Film History at the University of New Mexico (Albuquerque). Webside Editor of this journal, has published several articles on cinema and history relationship, and the book *Mexican Cinema. Reflections of a Society, 1896-1988* (Berkeley University Press). He has been also the Director of two International Seminars on Spanish Film at the University of Barcelona (1993, 1997).