Veni, vidi, video: Screen portrayals of the Roman Empire

By Tony Keen

In Mervyn LeRoy’s 1951 epic Quo Vadis, there is a scene in which the Emperor Nero, played by Peter Ustinov, shows his court a model of his planned new Rome. Many people with an interest in ancient Rome may recognize the model as that made in reality by Italo Gismondi for Mussolini’s Museo della Civiltà Romana (Museum of Roman Civilization), which in 1951 was not yet complete. They may also know that this model shows not Nero’s plans for Rome, nor even the Rome of Nero’s time (54-68 CE), but the city of three centuries later, in the age of Constantine (306-337 CE), when most of Nero’s buildings had been deliberately suppressed and buried under the constructions of later emperors.

This sort of amusing anachronism can be seen in many movies about the Roman Empire, and is one of the joys of ancient epic – another example is spotting railway viaducts in the background in Stanley Kubrick’s Spartacus (1960). But it is all too easy to nitpick, without understanding the production pressures, or what the movie-makers were trying to achieve. For LeRoy, the existence of the Gismondi model, and the generous donation of its use by the Italian government, allowed a dramatic scene that would otherwise have demanded a specially-constructed and no doubt expensive model, or more likely have been done with plans (as in the 1964 Doctor Who story, ‘The Romans’). The number of people in the audience for whom the anachronism would destroy the reality of the movie was small enough for LeRoy not to be concerned. Similarly, when he used the same model for a brief establishing shot of Rome in Gladiator (2000), Ridley Scott was not bothered by the fact that Gismondi’s reasonably accurate reproduction of the buildings of the city did not match the more freelance CGI version subsequently seen in Scott’s movie – the model was not on screen long enough for most people to notice the discrepancy. As for Kubrick, he included viaducts in Spartacus at least twice, and the second is prominently visible near the horizon, and cannot have been missed while the shot was being set up. Kubrick must have wanted his audience to interpret these as the arches for aqueducts.

Deviations from historical fact do not always come about because those responsible are incompetent and ignorant (though on some occasions they do, as could be argued is the

---

1 This paper first appeared in two parts, in the science fiction fanzine Banana Wings (edited by Mark Plummer and Claire Brialey), 29 (February 2007), pp. 16-21, and 30 (May 2007), pp. 12-16. I’d like to thank the editors and correspondents, Penny Goodman for her comments on Part I, and Liz Gloyn for her comments on the whole piece. It has not been substantially revised to take account of developments after 2007.

2 Based on an 1895 novel by Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz. The 1951 version ostentatiously dispenses with a question mark in the title, as that was not a real Latin punctuation mark. Other versions of the story, including the original novel, retain it.

3 A still image of this scene was used as the cover for Maria Wyke’s 1997 study Projecting the Past.

4 Though observation of the movie suggests that the model had been disassembled and then put back together in the studio in such a way that it no longer resembled the actual arrangement of buildings in fourth century CE Rome.

5 Not unreasonably, as viaducts of the Victorian era had often deliberately imitated Roman aqueducts.
case with Antoine Fuqua’s 2004 *King Arthur*). Movie-makers are not often trying to create an animated history book, and other imperatives than historical accuracy are usually at work. This article is intended to give an introductory idea of why and how the Roman Empire has been used by movie-makers over the years. It is not meant to be exhaustive, nor are the readings I’ll be putting forward the only ones that can be drawn from these movies. And whilst I suggest that many Hollywood movies carried an overt political message, and more probably did so than is often acknowledged, I am not suggesting that this is true of every Hollywood movie.

I’ll be concentrating on movies emerging from Hollywood in the period 1950-1964, as that is the period when mainstream cinema had most interest in Rome, and it is those movies with which I am most familiar. However, I will have something to say about earlier and later movies, European movies, and television productions. I should say that I have not necessarily seen every movie referred to (indeed, some movies depicting antiquity no longer exist and cannot be seen, most notably J. Gordon Edwards’ erotically-charged *Cleopatra* of 1917). Perhaps more importantly, I make no great claim to originality in what I am going to say here. I follow a path marked out in the past by many cultural critics, such as Maria Wyke and Christopher Frayling.

1 **European attitudes to Rome**

The first thing that needs to be recognised is that the popular imagination in different nations displays contrasting attitudes towards the Roman Empire. These can be very divergent from others, depending on which side of the Atlantic they derive from.

Popular British culture tended, until fairly recently, to be very favourable to the Roman Empire, viewing it as a civilizing influence upon the world, an ancient parallel to what Britons liked to think was the role played by the British Empire. The British may have accepted that some individual emperors were a bit loopy, but, at least up until the 1970s, they tended not to question the institution of the empire itself. The way Britons used to think is well summed up by a scene in the final episode of *I Claudius* (1976), ‘Old King Log’. Claudius is on his deathbed, and has a vision of the Sibyl (a Roman prophetess). She tells him that the Empire will go on, and that, ‘[t]he emperors won’t be a bad lot after [Nero]. Well, give or take a few.’

This scene has no parallel in Robert Graves’ novel *Claudius the God* (1935; the sequel to *I, Claudius*, published in 1934), and is entirely the invention of screenwriter Jack Pulman, who, as Professor Mary Beard has shown, wrote most of the memorable moments in the television adaptation. (He appears to have had all the original sources to hand, as well as Graves’ novels, and to have constructed his script as much from Tacitus and Suetonius directly as from Graves’ interpretation of them.) Graves himself might well not have expressed such sentiments. His novels, and his hero Claudius, espouse Republicanism against the tyranny of empire (it is surely no coincidence that the novels were written in

---

6 Though related to Greek rather than Roman epic, the final chapter of Robin Lane Fox’s *The Making of Alexander* (2004) is an excellent study of why historical movies sometimes distort history, and why it is often unfair to castigate them on these grounds.

7 It appears that Robert Graves’ novel has a comma after that ‘I’, but the BBC TV series does not.

Majorca in the early years of the Second Spanish Republic, when Republicanism would have been a hot political topic, one that would lead the country to civil war.

Graves was, however, an exception, and most Britons took the view Pulman reflects, at least when considering the Empire as a whole. That has rather changed now, due to post-imperial guilt – if Britons are ambivalent about their own empire, they will be ambivalent about all empires.

Moreover, this view was always tempered by an ambivalence that crept in when looking at the Roman invasion and occupation of Britain. For example, British tradition has, until recently, never been clear about whether to treat Boudicca/Boadicea as a rebel or a heroine (though I can’t here go into the various different treatments of Boudicca in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries). Even after the Second World War, when issues relating to the perceived threat of German invasion were being out worked through science fiction such as John Wyndham’s *Day of the Triffids* and Nigel Kneale’s *Quatermass* serials (and eventually *Doctor Who*), there seems to have been little enthusiasm for using Boudicca as a British heroine. There had been a silent *Boadicea* in 1928, but the next significant treatment was the Hammer production in 1967 of Don Chaffey’s *The Viking Queen*, which is Boudicca’s story with the serial numbers filed off and many unhistorical elements inserted. The same ambivalence, about whether to be on the side of the great empire or the conquered Britons, can be seen in the 1977 BBC adaptation of *The Eagle of the Ninth*, which features Britons bemoaning the Roman jackboot (sentiments not to be found quite so prominently in Rosemary Sutcliff’s original 1954 novel).

In more recent years, with post-imperial guilt and a desire on the part of Britons to distance themselves from Rome and recapture their Celtic past, Boudicca has become less equivocal, with Manda Scott’s tetralogy of novels and a 2003 *Boudica* starring Alex Kingston. Mel Gibson is now involved in producing a movie called *Warrior*, allegedly intended for release in 2008 – one suspects this may be another opportunity for Gibson to indulge in the anti-English sentiment previously seen in *Braveheart* (1995) and *The Patriot* (2000).

Elsewhere in Europe, France is a nation as proud of its Gallo-Roman inheritance as Britain is of the Romano-British (and with a better claim to be direct inheritors of Roman culture); but it is also proud of its Gallic heroes, especially Vercingetorix, most famously honoured by Napoleon III’s commission of a seven-metre statue at Alise-Sainte-Rein (the place generally thought to be ancient Alesia). Moreover, where in Britain issues relating to the threat of German invasion were dealt with through science fiction, in France, the Romans were used to articulate issues relating to an actual German occupation. This is the background against which to read the early *Asterix the Gaul* comic strips, and the movies based upon them. Later, however, *Asterix* becomes less about resistance to physical invasion, and more about resistance to cultural domination, and also perhaps reaching a *modus*

---

9 Commented on by Beard in BBC4’s *Togas on TV* (7 July 2006).

10 As is commonly known, ‘Boadicea’ is probably a mistranscription of the name of the Iceni queen made by a medieval scribe. Various spellings of the name are to be found in modern works, of which the most common are ‘Boudicca’ or ‘Boudica’.

11 It’s well-known now that Britain was not in serious danger of invasion in 1940. The German armed forces were ill-equipped for such an operation, and never came close to eliminating the twin threats of the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. But people believed that invasion was imminent through the second half of 1940 and most of 1941.

12 But as of 2013 still not made.
vivendi with a culturally dominant power that does not submerge one’s own national character. Rome is no longer symbolic of Germany, but of America.

The Italians, of course, had no ambivalence about Rome, and (Spartacus aside, perhaps) no national heroes who had resisted Roman power. Thus Rome was a natural subject matter for Italian cinema; silent epics Roman such as Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii (The Last Days of Pompeii, 1908) and Quo Vadis? (1912) kick-started the Italian movie industry, and remakes of Messalina (1923), Quo Vadis? (1924) and Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii (1926) were symptomatic of its stagnation in the 1920s.

The ambitious, and now newly-restored, Cabiria (1914), which influenced D.W. Griffith’s Intolerance (1916), presents a favourable view of the Roman occupation of North Africa, not coincidentally when Italy was once again establishing an imperial presence in Libya. Twenty years later Mussolini would commission the propagandist but also artistically-impressive Scipio l’Africano (1937) to drive the same message home even more firmly.

After the Second World War, the Roman heritage remains important for Italian cinema. The Cinecittà studios near Rome were much used by Hollywood epics, such as the 1951 Quo Vadis, the 1959 Ben-Hur, and the 1963 Cleopatra. Frederico Fellini’s work often deals with Roman themes, most obviously in Fellini Satyricon (1969), but also in his explorations of modern Rome, La Dolce Vita (1960) and Roma (1972). Italian broadcaster RAI was one of the three partners behind the 2005-2007 television series Rome, which again was filmed at Cinecittà.

2 The American attitude: Republic good, Empire bad

In the United States, especially as represented by Hollywood movies, the attitude is very different. Movies such as the 1951 Quo Vadis, Henry Koster’s The Robe (1953) and, most recently, Gladiator, present a view of the Roman Empire as being inherently corrupt and corrupting. Imperial Rome is everything that freedom-loving America is not.

This is not to read America as inherently anti-Rome, but anti-Roman Empire. Indeed, from the nation’s origins, the United States has constructed its identity in positive reference to Rome. This appropriation of Roman culture can be seen in their political institutions (e.g. the Senate) and in the architecture of Washington, D.C. (for instance, the neo-classical form of the Supreme Court, and the name of the Capitol).

---

13 Another Italian art director, Pier Paolo Pasolini, on the other hand, found inspiration in Greek rather than Roman subject matter, in Edipo Re (1967) and Medea (1969). Sergio Leone completed the 1959 remake of Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii after Mario Bonnard fell ill, but then went on to make Il Colosso di Rodi (The Colossus of Rhodes, 1961), a movie drawing upon Greek history.

14 As was the 2008 Doctor Who episode, ‘The Fires of Pompeii’.

15 See Maria Wyke, ‘Promoting the Present: The Roman Empire in ’50s and ’60s Hollywood’, AA309 Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire (Open University 2000), VC3 [DVD2], t.c. 1:37:21-1:54:35.
But the American Founding Fathers viewed themselves not as the general heirs of Rome, but the specific heirs of the democratic Republic. George Washington was described as being a new Cincinnatus, who was a Roman Republican hero that left his farm to save the state from foreign invasion, and then returned to his simple country life; the Italian neo-classicist sculptor Canova depicted the first US President in Roman dress.

Nowadays, partly under Hollywood’s influence, Rome has become so closely identified with the Empire and with a class-based system that the American élite do not turn to Roman models as much as they once did. Comparisons with Rome are more likely to be made by the American political establishment’s opponents. Critics of the neoconservative regime of George W. Bush were ready to compare America to Rome, so it has not fallen out of use completely. But Rome, when it is used, rarely represents anything positive, in the way that it did to the Founding Fathers. And Hollywood’s creation of the popular image of Rome must be partly responsible for that.16

The earlier attitude – Republic good, Empire bad – is reflected in the movies of the 1950s. A good example can be found in The Robe (based on a 1942 novel by Lloyd C. Douglass). The father of Marcellus Gallio (the latter played by a young Richard Burton) gives his son a lecture on Marcellus’ politically naïve behaviour, in which the elder Gallio says, ‘I’m fighting for what’s left of the Republic against the growing tyranny of the emperors.’

16 One might add that fewer American children are now educated about Rome at school, thus making it no longer part of the shared rhetorical background. But I suspect that itself is partly to do with the identification of Rome with élite class, hence its falling out of favour.
Such a view is still to be seen in *Gladiator*, where Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) talks of the ‘dream that was Rome’. That dream is of a democratic Republic, which Marcus Aurelius wishes to restore.\textsuperscript{17}

Where the Republic is an ideal to be aspired to, the Empire is something from which to be distanced. America remains very uncomfortable with the notion of empire, and many Americans deny that the United States has one. Thus, a positive identification with imperial Rome is not to be found in the movies of the 1950s and 1960s. In the words of Professor Simon Goldhill, in the Hollywood epics ‘[t]he Romans stand for a brutal militaristic regime whose ruthlessness and efficiency are only undone by its excessive sexuality and perverse corruption.’\textsuperscript{18}

3 Rome representing Britain

Jonathan Freedland, in his 2002 television documentary *Rome: The Model Empire*,\textsuperscript{19} points out that America’s foundation myth revolves around the defiance offered to an empire by its oppressed citizens, the imperial power in this case being Britain. It is therefore hardly surprising, especially as British popular culture was already identifying the British and Roman Empires, that the Americans also linked the two, though in a far less favourable light. Such identification appears already in the nineteenth century, in Robert Montgomery Bird’s 1831 play *The Gladiator*, based on the life of Spartacus. Since American literature of the nineteenth century was one of the major influences upon the development of Hollywood epic (the five times filmed\textsuperscript{20} *Ben-Hur* began as an 1880 novel), it is not surprising that the Roman Empire continued in these movies to be, if sometimes unconsciously, symbolic of America’s past defiance of the British Empire.

This partly manifests (as argued by Christopher Frayling, amongst others) through the casting of actors to play Romans. Romans are often portrayed by British actors, whilst North Americans play those who are, one way or another, outsiders in the Roman Empire. This trend is already observable in the 1951 *Quo Vadis* and *The Robe*, and in the 1959 *Ben-Hur*, director William Wyler deliberately cast Britons as Romans, and North Americans as Jews; however, this was quite a late decision, as North Americans Leslie Nielsen and Kirk Douglas were both considered for the role of the Roman villain Messala, whilst Italian Cesare Danova was considered for Judah Ben-Hur (screen test footage of Nielsen and Danova survives). In *Spartacus*, the three principal Roman roles, Crassus, Lentulus Batiatus, and the fictional, or at least chronologically-misplaced, Gracchus, were portrayed by Laurence Olivier, Peter Ustinov and Charles Laughton (who chose to emphasize Gracchus’ role as a champion of the

\textsuperscript{17} This scene may also be influenced by the supposed secret plans of Claudius to have the Republic restored after his death, as featured in Graves’ *Claudius the God* and the BBC *I Claudius*. Historically, of course, Marcus Aurelius had no such plans.


\textsuperscript{19} See also ‘Rome, AD … Rome, DC?’, *The Guardian*, 18 September 2002, [http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,794029,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,794029,00.html) [accessed August 2007].

\textsuperscript{20} A 1907 short, the 1925 silent epic (dir.: Fred Niblo), the 1959 epic (dir.: William Wyler), a 2003 animated version and a 2010 television mini-series.
people through employing his native Yorkshire accent as if flat caps and whippets would go out of style if he didn’t).\(^{21}\)

One should not over-emphasize this. For one thing, the association of Roman costume drama with the works of Shakespeare may have been a factor; classically-trained actors seem to have appealed to Hollywood more if they were British rather than North American. Moreover, many movies only employed a small number of British actors, using North Americans for more minor Roman roles – Julius Caesar in *Spartacus* is played by Californian John Gavin, as are most of the other Romans. Some directors also deliberately cast against type, as when Joseph L. Mankiewicz and producer John Houseman chose Marlon Brando for the role of Mark Antony in the 1953 movie version of William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.\(^{22}\) The casting of Richard Burton in *The Robe* both conforms to the trope, identifying Marcellus Gallio as a Roman, and subverts it, since he is the character with whom the audience is meant to identify (in *Quo Vadis* that role, Marcus Vinicius, goes to a comforting North American, Robert Taylor).

One could argue that the casting of Britons as Romans is simply a manifestation of a general tendency to cast British actors as villains and figures of authority. But this last argument begs the question of why Britons get these roles. It would be chauvinist to say that it’s just that they’re better actors.\(^{23}\) I think that it goes back again to the association of Britain with bad empires, ever since Paul Revere was first alleged to have said ‘The British are coming!’; and a general anti-Britishness still to be found in many Americans at least as late as the 1940s. The casting of Britons as bad Romans is part of a tradition that still manifests in the continued use of Anthony Hopkins, Alan Rickman, Sean Bean and other Britons as Hollywood villains.\(^{24}\)

It may further be that the casting of Britons was meant to equate Rome with America’s European enemies, rather than necessarily Britain itself.

4 **Rome representing America’s enemies**

Quite consciously, Rome has been for Hollywood representative of whatever ‘Evil Empire’ the United States has been opposed to at the time. In the 1950s and 1960s, this was Josef Stalin’s Soviet Union. When *The Robe* was being prepared, religious magazines commented that the movie’s pro-Christian message was timely in the light of the anti-Christian Stalin’s opposition to America, upholder of true Christian values. It is, I suspect, not fanciful to see an echo of Red Square parades in the parade of chariots before the great race in the 1959 *Ben-Hur* (though this also replicates a scene in the 1925 version).

\(^{21}\) Kirk Douglas says in the commentary for the 2004 Special Edition of *Spartacus* that it was his intention to cast Americans as slaves and Britons as Romans, and was therefore initially reluctant to cast Jean Simmons as Varinia.

\(^{22}\) Brando studied Laurence Olivier and John Barrymore’s recordings of Shakespeare, and then turned to John Gielgud, cast in the movie as Cassius, for coaching, something which I think reflects well on both Brando and Gielgud. The result is a towering performance that makes James Mason as Brutus look stiff and wooden.

\(^{23}\) Though at least part of it must go back to the coming of sound to cinema, where many American actors, trained for the screen, proved to have unsuitable voices, where the stage-trained British actors such as Charles Laughton were much more able to project.

\(^{24}\) Interestingly, this is reversed in *The Eagle* (dir.: Kevin Macdonald, 2011), where all Romans are played by North Americans, or people affecting North American accents, and all Britons by British actors.
Stalinist resonances in 1950s Hollywood epic appear mainly in general presentations of hostile autocratic rule. Rather more explicit are references to the empires that America had just been fighting, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. As with the British Empire, this is a case of negatively equating with the Roman Empire states which themselves made positive connections with the Roman past. Mussolini characterized his Italy as a rebirth of the Roman Empire, and made great capital of the two thousandth birthday of the emperor Augustus in 1937, whilst Roman architecture and symbols such as the imperial eagle were appropriated by Hitler’s Germany.

When John Huston, the originally-assigned director of *Quo Vadis* (before delays caused by internal studio politics made him lose interest and work on *The Red Badge of Courage* instead), was making his preparations, he explicitly intended Nero’s persecution of the Christians to be compared with the German extermination of the Jews. In the 1959 *Ben-Hur*, before the chariot race, Pontius Pilate gives what is clearly a Nazi salute to the assembled masses in the circus, saying ‘Hail, Caesar!’ The symbolism is not hard to read. The connection with recent history is emphasized in that movie by allusion to the creation of the state of Israel, in remarks made by Charlton Heston in the role of Judah Ben-Hur about how Judaea will rise again. (These Zionist sentiments do partly derive from similar views expressed, if less forcefully, in the equivalent scene in Wallace’s novel.) Of course, any audience able to see both the overt equation of Romans and Nazis and the more subtle association of the Roman Empire with the British Empire might conclude that Britain was being associated with Nazi Germany. Given America’s recent alliance with Britain against Germany, that might seem strange, and potentially offensive to at least one overseas market. But most audiences probably did not make the connection. Moreover, Anglophobia was still present in 1940s and 1950s America, and *Ben-Hur*’s messages probably played well enough. As shall be seen again later, these movies could function at many levels.

An anti-Nazi or anti-Fascist reading could even be imposed on movies conceived before the Second World War. In 1944 Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Sign of the Cross*, first released in 1932, and notable for Claudette Colbert as probably the best-cast Poppaea in cinematic history, was reissued with a prologue and epilogue specifically relating the movie to the then-ongoing Allied campaign in Italy. On the other hand, the 1935 US version of *The Last Days of Pompeii* already had such a reading imposed by the publicity issued at the time of original release.

Nazi Germany is another theme picked up more recently by *Gladiator*. Many critics have observed that the way the city of Rome is presented in this movie echoes Leni Riefenstahl’s 1934 Nazi propaganda piece *Triumph of the Will*. Ridley Scott distances himself from this, saying that the Nazis copied the Romans, and thereby implying that similarities between his movie and Riefenstahl’s are because they are both using the same source material. It is certainly true that Riefenstahl uses Rome, but her imagery has become so ingrained into the vocabulary of cinema that Scott could well have been influenced without realizing it. How-

25 The eagle is, of course, also a symbol of the United States. This has not worried most production designers, who put on screen Roman eagles that resemble those of Germany or Italy (or earlier imperial states such as Napoleonic France or Tsarist Russia) rather than echoing the iconography of the US.


27 As ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, after the publication of *Ben-Hur*, Wallace intervened on behalf of Zionists wishing to settle in Palestine.

28 Nero’s second wife, who was, according to Tacitus, notoriously amorous and seductive.
ever, watching the beginning of *Triumph of the Will* again, one becomes less inclined to accept Scott’s denials that he lifted imagery from that movie – the aerial shot through clouds and prominent highlighting of the imperial eagle that Riefenstahl uses to introduce Nuremberg are also motifs that Scott uses to introduce Rome.

5 Rome representing what America could become

One thing that historical epic and science fiction have in common is that both can be used as a means of obliquely commenting upon contemporary society, without provoking the sort of controversy that directly addressing the arguments would. To quote Goldhill again, ‘[a]ncient Rome [and, though Goldhill does not say so, sf] acts like a veil: it makes decent and let us see what would otherwise be hidden, or too exposed.’\(^\text{29}\) With this in mind, one can see how Rome could not only be used as symbolic of what America was not, but as a warning of what America could be if democratic norms were subverted.

Frank Tuttle’s 1933 comedy *Roman Scandals* already suggests that the corruption of imperial Rome is replicated in depression-period America. But two movies of the 1960s illustrate Rome as a warning particularly well. One is, of course, *Spartacus*. From the moment it was conceived, this was a left-wing movie. Star and executive producer Kirk Douglas has suggested that his motivation was primarily disappointment at not getting the lead in the 1959 *Ben-Hur*, resulting in him wanting to create an epic to outdo Wyler’s; he appears to have read Howard Fast’s novel with a view to filming it as early as 1957.\(^\text{30}\) But I think he is being disingenuous here – if this was all there was to it, he could have chosen a far less contentious subject. *Spartacus* had been adopted as a hero of the proletariat by Marx himself, and Rosa Luxemburg’s Spartakusbund of the First World War period was only one of a number of Marxist organizations that named themselves after the rebellious gladiator. Howard Fast, author of the novel the movie used as its basis (and first screenwriter for the movie), was a known Communist;\(^\text{31}\) he had been imprisoned in 1950 and subsequently blacklisted, for refusing to co-operate with the House Un-American Activities Committee.\(^\text{32}\) He began writing *Spartacus* in prison, and the novel has an openly Marxist slant (toned down somewhat in the movie). A similar fate had befallen screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, who had also been blacklisted, and initially worked on *Spartacus* under a pseudonym. Douglas’ decision to credit Trumbo under his own name (and Fast for the original novel) helped to break the Hollywood blacklist.\(^\text{33}\)
All involved were aware of the potential danger in the movie’s message, and the final movie is far more individualist (and influenced by Douglas’ own Zionist convictions) than Communist. Again, the choice of Rome as subject matter allows points to be made in a less contentious fashion than might otherwise have been the case. Though the American Legion of Decency attempted to boycott the movie, many people probably read the movie *Spartacus* in the light of other epics (especially after Universal recut the movie to reduce its political element), and took it as another anti-Stalinist work.34 But when Crassus tells Gracchus that ‘[i]n every city and province, lists of the disloyal have been compiled,’ many would have thought of Senator Joseph McCarthy rather than Josef Stalin. The famous ‘I am Spartacus’ scene, where the defeated slaves all make that claim rather than give up their leader to Crassus, might also be taken as a reference to the refusal of many to name names to HUAC.35

The other movie is *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (of which *Gladiator* is an unacknowledged remake), made in 1964 by Anthony Mann, who had been sacked from *Spartacus* after two weeks. Like *Gladiator*, this thoughtful, if sometimes sprawling, movie constructs itself partially through reference to earlier epics. The title, however, is a reference to Edward Gibbon’s classical historical work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, though it only really dramatizes the beginning of that work. Stephen Boyd, famous as Messala in *Ben-Hur*, and who would have been Mark Antony in *Cleopatra* had not star Elizabeth Taylor’s illness held up production, plays the hero, Livius. Sophia Loren is the love interest; Mann had used Loren in his 1961 medieval epic, *El Cid* (she had also been in *Attila* [1954] and had a minor role in *Quo Vadis*). Alec Guinness brings the same British gravitas to Marcus Aurelius as Olivier brought to Crassus in *Spartacus*. But the movie also reflects a nation far less comfortable with itself than it had been in the previous decade (a similar transformation takes place in the American western at the same time, as the confidence of John Ford’s *Fort Apache* [1948] slowly gives way to the cynicism of Sam Peckinpah’s *Ride the High Country* [1962]). Maria Wyke has pointed to a speech in which Marcus Aurelius presents a vision for a Roman future that emphasizes universal brotherhood, and linked it to similar visions presented by American Presidents in the years since the Second World War, especially John F. Kennedy. Like Kennedy, Marcus Aurelius is assassinated before he can bring his vision to fruition, and his successor does not share his ideals.

Hollywood epics are not known for their happy endings, as will be seen later in this article, but even by their standards, that of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is particularly bleak. Livius’ plans to militarily overthrow the mad emperor Commodus (Christopher Plummer) have been thwarted, his troops being bought off with gold. His lover, Marcus Aurelius’ daughter Lucilla (Loren), is chained to a stake, about to be burnt alive, together with leaders of Livius’ German allies, and some Christians. Livius is challenged to a gladiatorial duel by Commodus, which he wins, killing the emperor, but Commodus’ dying act is to order the pyres lit, and Livius is only able to save Lucilla – the others are burnt, the Germans calling the curses of their god Wotan upon the Empire. Livius rejects the offer of the imperial throne, and leaves with Lucilla as the leading senators bid increasing cash sums for the throne of Rome (something that did historically happen in the year after Commodus’ death,

34 See Wyke, op. cit., p.71.

35 It should also be mentioned that earlier and ostensibly more conservative movies such as *The Robe* and *Ben-Hur* also include scenes that disparage the collection of names of subversives. Blacklisted writer Albert Maltz co-wrote the screenplay of *The Robe*, but was not credited at the time.
when Didius Julianus made himself emperor by winning an auction presided over by the Praetorian Guard). As the black smoke rises over the impressive recreation of the Roman Forum, a voice-over, spoken by historian Will Durant,\(^\text{36}\) says:

> A great civilisation is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within.

There is surely a message there intended for the American audience of the time.

Later movies continue the conflation of Rome and America. *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*, both in the 1962 stage original, and even more in Richard Lester’s 1966 movie, takes the stereotypes of post-war America and places them on a Roman street. It can even be argued (as Monica Silveira Cyrino does in her 2005 study *Big Screen Rome*) that Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* can be read as a meditation on what it means to be the world’s only superpower, and is asking the audience what sort of a superpower do they want America to become.

6 Historical periods: The Republic

Given the negative portrayal of Rome in the American cinema and the positive image of the Roman Republic, and the desire to present Rome as what America is not and does not aspire to become, it is perhaps not surprising that few movies portray the Early or Middle Republic (the period from 509 BCE to about 133 BCE). The potential for mixed messages – if the Roman Republic is good, is its annexing its neighbours a good thing or a bad thing? – seems to have discouraged directors and producers from choosing such subject matter.

The exploits of the Carthaginian leader Hannibal (247-182 BCE), famous for leading his elephants across the Alps (though most of them died, and within a year he had only one left), has attracted some interest. There is a rather poor Italian-American co-production *Hannibal* (1960), with Victor Mature in the lead, and two drama documentaries that revisit the subject have been recently seen on British television.\(^\text{37}\) All these fall foul of the anticlimactic nature of Hannibal’s story, where his three dazzling early victories were followed by thirteen years of inconsequential campaigning in Italy, while the Second Punic War (218-202 BCE) was being decided elsewhere. This does not make for a good dramatic structure. Though there were two Hannibal movies supposedly in preproduction when I wrote this piece in 2007, one with Vin Diesel attached and one with Denzel Washington, it seems unlikely either will ever be made (Diesel was still talking up his Punic-language *Hannibal the Conqueror* for a 2008 release, but, again, it has yet to happen).

Other than that, few movies set in the Republic have made an impact. The episode on Tiberius Gracchus (killed in 133 BCE) from the BBC’s 2006 drama documentary series *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* is the only screen presentation of which I know of the Gracchi, key figures of the Late Republic.\(^\text{38}\) But that series is not really interested in the

\(^{36}\) According to Monica Silveira Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome* (2005), p. 224. The Internet Movie Database credits the narration to Italian actor Robert Rietty, who played the police chief in *The Italian Job* (1969); this seems implausible, as the voice does not sound the same. Durant worked on the movie as an advisor.


\(^{38}\) Unless Gracchus in *Spartacus* is considered to be one of the brothers, translated to fifty years after they were both dead. It is true that Laughton’s character’s name is given as Sempronius Gracchus (Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus being the revolutionary’s full name) in such materials as the cast list accompanying the
Republic. Gracchus is included because he can be seen as the point at which began a century of political strife, at the end of which the imperial system emerged from the Republic. This is the story that the series is taking, showing how the Empire started and how it ended.  

The same interest in the roots of the imperial system lies behind Spartacus. Depicting a slave uprising of 73-71 BCE, it does, of course, take place in the Late Republic (133-27 BCE), but the movie takes the approach that by this time the Republic had acquired most of the features of the Empire. Indeed, it emphasizes this by having Crassus unhistorically make himself dictator (or, in the script, ‘First Consul’) of Rome.

The historical end of the Republican system of government was brought about not by Crassus, but by Julius Caesar, who is included in Spartacus (whilst it is not impossible that he might have been involved, there is no evidence that he had anything to do with the Servile War against Spartacus, and he is not in Fast’s novel). Because of his flamboyance and many conquests, Caesar has been a popular figure to choose when depicting the point at which ‘democracy’ in Rome is overturned by autocracy. His popularity is partly also to do with the fact that his own accounts of much of his career survive, and further because of the attention given to him by Shakespeare. Often, screen accounts of Caesar are versions of Shakespeare’s play. The Internet Movie Database lists seventeen, most of which are television productions. Two movie adaptations, one by David Bradley in 1950 and one by Stuart Burge in 1970, feature Charlton Heston as Mark Antony. The most famous, however, is Mankiewicz’s 1953 movie (which was made for cinema but looks like a television production).

An important subgenre of Cesarian movies, of course, consists of movies featuring the exotic Egyptian queen Cleopatra; here moral statements about the abuse of power can be combined with the lure of luxurious sex (I shall return to this subject later). Some, again, are based on Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra (including a 1972 version once again featuring Charlton Heston as Mark Antony). Even the ostensibly more original creations are clearly influenced by the Bard. Most famous of these is the 1963 epic, which allowed the director (Joseph L. Mankiewicz again) to restage the assassination of Caesar which he had previously shown in Julius Caesar, in a very similar fashion (clearly referring back to the previous movie). This was cruelly mocked by Peter Rogers’ Carry on Cleo in 1964, which quotes from the end of Shakespeare’s play.  

But mention must also be made of J. Gordon Edwards’ 1917 Theda Bara vehicle, Cecil B. DeMille’s 1934 Cleopatra with Claudette Colbert (which influenced at least some of the production design of Carry on Cleo), and Gabriel Pascal’s Caesar and Cleopatra (1946), a filmed version of George Bernard Shaw’s play, with Vivien Leigh convincingly playing a decade younger than her actual age. More recent is a 1999

---

39 Although fears of audience unfamiliarity with the individuals of the Late Republic meant that the first episode dealt with the emperor Nero, before working backwards through Julius Caesar to Tiberius Gracchus. Thus historical progression was sacrificed for ratings impact.

40 And gives Kenneth Williams a last line (‘Oh, what’s the use?’) presciently similar to the last entry in his diary before his death (‘Oh, what’s the bloody point?’).
television movie *Cleopatra*, featuring Timothy Dalton as Caesar. This is reviled in some quarters, though it is not quite as bad as sometimes made out.

7 **Historical periods: The Emperors**

It is with the imperial period that Hollywood truly gets its teeth into Rome. It must be said, however, that only a relatively small number of emperors have been represented on screen. Augustus, the first emperor (reigned 27 BCE-14 CE), often appears in movies dealing with the aftermath of the assassination of Julius Caesar, and Antony and Cleopatra. In these he is generally referred to as ‘Octavian’ or ‘Octavius Caesar’. The subsequent forty-four years of his reign have not often been filmed. However, he does feature in the opening episodes of *I Claudius*, and in 2003 Peter O’Toole (who more than twenty years earlier had played the dissolute Tiberius in *Caligula*) took on the role of the emperor in a rather good TV miniseries, *Imperium: Augustus* (also known as *Augustus: The First Emperor*). Perhaps Augustus suits the more thoughtful approach that television, as opposed to the epic movie, can offer (one might also mention Allan Massie’s successful 1986 novel *Augustus*). His reign is largely a story of political reform, though with a fair share of court intrigue, and he doesn’t really get his comeuppance at the end (unless one believes, as Robert Graves chose to, that he was murdered by his wife, Livia). And Augustus is a figure who is often admired for his achievement in restoring stability after the chaos of the Civil Wars. He is thus a difficult figure to portray if one wants to question the whole notion of the Roman Empire being a good idea. This is perhaps again why so many depictions of his life go only as far as the end of his conflict with Antony, when it is far easier to present him (as both the 1963 and 1999 *Cleopatra* do) as a nasty piece of work. The second season of HBO’s *Rome* takes the same approach, presenting Octavian fairly accurately as, in the words of Penelope Goodman, ‘a nerdy kid with a vicious streak’, and ends at the moment of his triumph.

Augustus’ successor Tiberius (14-37 CE) often features both in movies that are actually about his mad nephew Caligula (of whom see below), and in movies that relate to the crucifixion of Jesus, as this took place in his reign. An example of the latter is *The Robe*. It is notable, however, that Hollywood does not care for the hypocrite and pervert Tiberius of Tacitus and Suetonius. The two productions that most focus upon the Capri period, *I Claudius* and *Caligula*, are both European productions. (In *The Last Legion*, set four centuries after his death, he is referred to as a great emperor, and scenes are set in his palace on Capri without ever saying what went on there.)

41 With this and his appearance as Rhett Butler in *Scarlett* (1994), Dalton seems to have spent the 1990s carving out a career in unnecessary sequels to or remakes of classic movies.

42 He was born Gaius Octavius. On adoption by Caesar, he would officially have become Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus. He himself never used ‘Octavianus’, preferring to emphasise his links with Julius Caesar by using the dictator’s name, and encouraged this usage in his close circle, though others did use ‘Octavianus’, and modern scholars refer to him as Octavian up to 27 BCE. His enemies continued to refer to him as ‘Octavius’. The orator and politician Cicero can be seen in his letters to begin by using ‘Octavius’, then change to ‘Octavianus’, and finally adopt ‘Caesar’. In 27 BCE Octavian was granted the title ‘Augustus’, and it is by that he is referred to subsequently.

43 This is certainly how I was educated to view him, though when teaching his reign now I emphasize that this stability was built upon a military dictatorship.

44 The two major treatments of the whole of Augustus’ reign are, significantly, European productions: *I Claudius* was a British production, and *Augustus* Italian.
Hollywood has been particularly fond of three mad emperors. The most popular of these is Nero (54-68 CE). Memorable movies with this emperor are *The Sign of the Cross* and *Quo Vadis*. He also appears in comic guise in Mel Brooks’ *History of the World Part I* (1981, not actually named as Nero, but clearly that is who is meant), and in Bob Kellett’s British-made movie version of the television hit *Up Pompeii* (1971), where he is present at the destruction of the city in 79 CE (actually eleven years after the historical Nero died). The casting of Nero in these movies is often an interesting view into how people perceive the emperor. The real Nero was relatively young, only thirty when he died, but also quite corpulent. Minor productions such as *History of the World* or the Doctor Who story ‘The Romans’ tend to cast corpulent middle-aged actors – Dom DeLuise in the Brooks movie was forty-seven, and Derek Francis in *Doctor Who* forty-one. If a younger actor is cast, such as the thirty-seven year old Michael Sheen in *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*, they may not be corpulent. Patrick Cargill in *Up Pompeii* was both too old (fifty-two) and too thin. The big movies, however, tend to get it right. Peter Ustinov was twenty-nine when he made *Quo Vadis*, and Charles Laughton thirty-two in *The Sign of the Cross*, and both were physically right for the role.45

Next in popularity is Gaius Caligula (37-41 CE), who appears in *The Robe* and its sequel, Delmer Daves’ *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954),46 played by Jay Robinson. Famous non-Hollywood portrayals include John Hurt’s memorable Caligula in *I Claudius* and Malcolm McDowell’s in Tinto Brass’ art-porn *Caligula* (1979). Caligula’s reign would probably have also formed the main part of Alexander Korda’s aborted 1937 production of *I, Claudius*.47

Finally there is the mad son of Marcus Aurelius, Commodus (180-192 CE), who features in both *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator*. Other emperors with particularly bad reputations, such as the tyrant Domitian (81-96 CE) and the sexually bizarre Elagabalus (218-222 CE) have been passed over by movie-makers, though Domitian does briefly appear, along with his father Vespasian (69-79 CE), in the TV mini-series *Masada* (1981).48

It is worth noting that not only is there quite a limited number of mad emperors depicted, but that their madness is often depicted in very similar fashion, with only a few distinguishing attributes differentiating them – Nero has his lyre, Caligula his horse, and Commodus his gladiatorial sword. This culminates in the depiction of Commodus in *Gladiator*, who seems to have the characteristics of every previous mad emperor. The hints of

45 The twenty-eight year old Christopher Biggins would also have been right when he appeared in *I Claudius*, had he been playing Nero towards the end of the emperor’s life. But he was instead playing the sixteen year old Nero, at which age the emperor was notably good looking. One notes here how the popular image of Nero as overweight is allowed to overwhelm the historical reality.

46 The two movies were made back-to-back, allowing the retention of cast members Victor Mature (Demetrius), Jay Robinson (Caligula) and Michael Rennie (Saint Peter) from the first movie into the second.

47 It isn’t clear – because much documentation for the movie had been lost even by the 1960s – whether this movie would have dealt with Claudius’ reign (AD 41-54) as well as Caligula’s. Certainly no footage was shot of scenes after Claudius’ accession, and that is the point at which the novel *I, Claudius* ends (and where the 2007 BBC Radio Two adaptation stops); Claudius’ reign was covered by Graves in *Claudius the God*. But a 1965 BBC documentary on the unfinished epic suggested that the licentiousness of Claudius’ wife Messalina might have been explored, which historically belongs to Claudius’ reign, and was treated in Graves’ second novel. Probably Messalina’s adultery would have been brought forward in time.

48 He is, however, omitted from the episode of *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* that depicts the Jewish revolt and features Vespasian and his elder son Titus. More recently he has turned up on television in *The Roman Mysteries*. 
incest between him and his sister Lucilla seems likely to have been drawn from depictions of Caligula, rather than historical evidence, even though the (not always reliable) *Historia Augusta* does allege that Commodus committed incest with some of his sisters (but not with Lucilla). The point here is that Hollywood loves its stereotypes. It likes its monsters to be all pretty much the same, whether they be Gaius Caligula, King John, or Ernst Stavro Blofeld. (This may be part of why Tiberius does not appeal.)

Other emperors tend to feature in movies in which the chief subject is one of the three named above, either being their predecessor (Tiberius in *The Robe*) or successor (Claudius in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*). Many other emperors, such as Trajan and Hadrian, have been neglected, though Aurelian (270-275 CE) appears in the 1959 European movie *Sign of the Gladiator* (*Nel segno di Roma*), which stars Anita Ekberg as the rebel queen Zenobia of Palmyra. (I shall look at Christian emperors later in this article.)

Sometimes, of course, a movie does not even feel the need for a historical emperor. In *Roman Scandals*, the emperor is called Valerius (and the Empress is Agrippa, which was actually a male name). This also has a worthy lineage, as Shakespeare was happy to invent the emperor Saturninus for *Titus Andronicus*.49

8 Endings: You can’t beat the system

I’ve already talked about the bleak end of *Fall of the Roman Empire*. However, though the finale of that movie is particularly harrowing, it fits in well with a similar set of downbeat conclusions to other Roman epics. *The Robe* ends with Marcellus Gallio and his lover Diana (Jean Simmons) going off to be executed. The last sequence of *Spartacus* sees Varinia (Jean Simmons again) bidding farewell to her lover Spartacus, as he dies, crucified on the Appian Way. At the end of *Cleopatra* (1963) the heroine (Elizabeth Taylor), and Mark Antony (Burton again), who has filled the role of hero for the second half of the movie, are dead. All these people have fallen victim to the forces of imperial Rome, as personified respectively by the emperor Caligula, ersatz emperor Crassus, and future emperor Octavian (Roddy McDowell in *Cleopatra*). The message is that the Empire will crush you, whatever.

The only people who thrive in the Empire are the corrupt. People of noble character only survive if they are weak and compliant. An example of this is Jack Hawkins’ character in the 1959 *Ben-Hur*, Quintus Arrius. Though he is a general, when faced with the loss of his ship and (he believes) disaster for his fleet, he instantly attempts suicide (a noble action in Roman terms, but presented in movies as being cowardly). He knows that he owes his victory to Judah Ben-Hur, and treats Judah as his own son – but he cannot give Judah the help he needs to save his family, and ultimately Judah rejects Arrius’ offer of Roman citizenship.50

Strong people who stand up for what is right are often destroyed, like Marcellus Gallio in *The Robe*, or Gracchus in *Spartacus*, who ends up taking his own life. If not destroyed themselves, they often end up losing almost everything they have – this is the fate of Livius in *Fall of the Roman Empire*, and of Marcus Vinicius in the 1951 *Quo Vadis*. Judah Ben-Hur is reduced from being a prosperous member of the Jewish élite to a slave, then climbs back up again, before throwing it all away – his salvation is found only by placing himself outside the Roman world.

49 The most notable movie adaptation is Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (1999), starring Anthony Hopkins.

50 Arrius has already adopted Judah, and Judah is using the Roman’s name. The act of adoption would in reality automatically confer Roman citizenship, but this is something the movie chooses to ignore.
Even if the man at the very top is moral and upright, the inherent corruption of the Empire will get him. This is what happens to Marcus Aurelius in *Fall of the Roman Empire*, poisoned by a cabal of senior figures who distrust the dream of equality that he is attempting to bring about.

In this, as in many other things, *Gladiator* draws on its predecessors. Maximus (Russell Crowe) defies the emperor, and brings him down – but he does not survive the experience.

### 9 Happier endings

Not all conclusions of epics are quite so depressing. Occasionally they can be more optimistic. This can be seen even by revisiting some of the examples above. Marcus Vinicius in *Quo Vadis* may be left with nothing but his lover Lygia (the late Deborah Kerr),[^51] but that is more than enough for him. Filmed versions of *The Last Days of Pompeii*[^52] end with the cataclysmic destruction of the city, but generally the hero and heroine of the story escape, a motif adopted also by Robert Harris’ recent novel *Pompeii* (2003).

An even more optimistic ending can be seen at the end of the sequel to *The Robe, Demetrius and the Gladiators*. Here the evil emperor Caligula is assassinated, and his uncle Claudius (Barry Jones) ascends the throne, promising to act as an emperor should. His wife Messalina (a smouldering Susan Hayward) promises at the same time to leave behind her promiscuous ways, and act the role of a proper Roman wife. Anyone familiar with the life story of the historical Messalina, presented in ancient sources as adulterous and sexually insatiable (and this movie appeared only twenty years after the publication of Graves’ *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, which had brought Messalina to greater public attention), would have found that final sequence full of irony.

It is worth comparing this with two other versions of the same moment in history. In Joseph Von Sternberg’s uncompleted *I, Claudius*, a far more hostile Senate is faced down by Claudius – a towering performance by Charles Laughton, delivering a speech that, like Geoffrey Howe’s resignation speech in the House of Commons in November 1990, begins mildly, but ends by shredding his targets to rags. Claudius’ speech promises just government in the future, but the looks on the faces of the Senate, and the army commanders that have put Claudius where he is, carry an implication that Claudius’ project will be undone.[^53] Tinto Brass’ *Caligula* is even less optimistic. After a bloody murder scene that spares none of the

---

[^51]: The British actress Kerr (Scottish, but often, as in at least one obituary, presented as an English Rose) in the role of the virtuous Christian love interest prefigures Jean Simmons’ later career in similar roles in Chester Erskine’s *Androcles and the Lion* (1952), *The Robe*, and as the pre-Christian but nevertheless virtuous Varinia in *Spartacus*. Kerr herself went on to appear as Portia in the 1953 *Julius Caesar*.

[^52]: There are eleven versions of which I am aware, mostly Italian productions or co-productions (and so often referred to as *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii*). They were released in 1900 (directed by William Booth [or Walter R. Booth?]; an early British movie that simply showed part of the destruction of the city), 1908 (Italy, dir.: Arturo Ambrosio and Luigi Maggi), 1913 (two Italian versions, one directed by Mario Caserni and Eleuterio Rodolfi – the better-known version – and another by Giovanni Enrico Vidal, with a third planned but cancelled), 1926 (Italy, dir.: Carmine Gallone and Amleto Palermi), 1935 (USA, dir.: E.B. Schoedsack), 1940 (dir.: Rafael E. Portas; made in Mexico), 1950 (dir.: Paolo Moffa), 1959 (dir.: Mario Bonnard, though completed by Sergio Leone), 1975 (porn), and 1984 (dir.: Peter R. Hunt; a US mini-series for television). On the various versions of Pompeii, see Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, ch. 6.

[^53]: As discussed earlier, because the movie was never completed, it is unclear if this would have been at the end, though it is where Graves’ *I, Claudius* concludes, and the last event in the chronology of Claudius’ life that was filmed.
horror of Suetonius’ ancient account, Claudius (Giancarlo Badessi) is carried off by the Praetorian Guard to be the new emperor. He has been portrayed throughout the movie as a fool, and as he is taken away, a look of pure fear is to be seen on his face. This is not a man for whom becoming an emperor is a happy ending.

10 The solution: Christianity

Given the often downbeat endings of Roman epic, one might ask how they maintained their popularity, given that cinema audiences often wanted to be uplifted rather than depressed. The answer to this lies in the link between Roman epic movies and Christianity.

Christianity, of course, was born in the Roman Empire. When Jesus was born, Judaea was a ruled by a client king, Herod the Great – by the time he was executed, it was a Roman province, and the provincial governor, Pontius Pilate, signed the execution order. So New Testament epics form a significant category of movies set in the Roman world. Examples include King of Kings (filmed twice, by Cecil B. DeMille in 1927, and Nicholas Ray in 1961), Richard Fleischer’s Barabbas (1961), George Stevens’ The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965); later can be added Franco Zefferelli’s TV mini-series Jesus of Nazareth (1977) and Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ (1988).

The subsequent history of the early Church is an important theme in many of the movies already discussed. This is particularly true of those movies based on successful novels of the nineteenth century or later. The two best-known Hollywood versions of Ben-Hur, that of 1925 (directed by Fred Niblo) and that of 1959, retain the subtitle of Lew Wallace’s 1880 novel, A Tale of the Christ. Saint Peter and the execution of Jesus feature in The Robe and Demetrius and the Gladiators, whilst the persecution of Christians under Nero provides the background for the much-filmed Quo Vadis and DeMille’s The Sign of the Cross.

The importance of Christianity is often played up even where the source material left it out, or played it in a different fashion. In Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1834 novel The Last Days of Pompeii the hero and heroine, Glaucus and Ione, only convert to Christianity after the destruction of Pompeii; there is, however, a strong subtext that this is the result of the destruction dealt out to the corrupt pagan city of Pompeii, and Glaucus first enquires about Christian doctrines in a cell in Pompeii. Other Christians are featured in the novel, including a guest appearance by Lazarus. Movie adaptations generally make Christianity an even stronger theme (though the 1913 silents leave it out). In the 1959 version, featuring Hercules star Steve Reeves, the plot is driven by a conspiracy to blame a series of murders on Christians. The 1935 movie goes even further. This American adaptation, with special effects by King Kong’s Willis O’Brien, keeps nothing but the title and setting of Lytton’s novel, and

54 Portraits of Claudius generally show him as a fool at the mercy of his wives, freedmen or others around him, or, as with Graves, a highly intelligent man, nevertheless still at the mercy of his wives, freedmen or others around him.

55 Though one I’ve largely passed over in this article.

56 Technically this version is The King of Kings.

57 Notable for a truly awful cameo by David Bowie in the role of Pontius Pilate.

58 Movie versions were made in 1902 (directed by Lucien Nonguet and Ferdinand Zecca), 1913 (dir.: Enrico Guazzoni), 1924 (dir.: Gabriellino d’Annunzio and Georg Jacoby), 1951 (dir.: Mervyn LeRoy), and 2001 (dir.: Jerzy Kawalerowicz, embracing the novel as part of Poland’s literary heritage). There is also a 1995 German television adaptation.
replaces his plot with a story that involves a character who, like Marcellus Gallio in *The Robe*, has witnessed the Crucifixion.

Christianity fulfils two functions in Roman epic. First, as Gideon Nisbet argues in *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture*, it allows the hero to prove his virility. One of the problems almost all ancient epics encounter is that the strong muscular heroes at the centre of their narratives tend to wear short skirts and show a lot of leg. Implications of camp and homosexual undertones are never far away. Movies can choose to embrace that, as recent Greek epics *Troy* (2004), *Alexander* (2004) and *300* (2007) all do, to one degree or another. Alternatively, different strategies for further emphasizing the hero’s virility can be adopted. One of these is to show how a pagan hero can break down the chaste reserve of a pure Christian girl. This is at the heart of the love story in *Quo Vadis*. There are variations upon it in other movies, such as *The Robe*, where it is the hero who converts first, and is followed by the heroine out of her love for him. (Another strategy, adopted particularly in movies set in the later Roman Empire, is to give the hero a good solid pair of trousers to wear under his skirt. This can be seen in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, and more recently in *The Last Legion* [2007].) The other function of Christianity is to provide the upbeat ending that otherwise would be missing. This can operate on a personal level. Gallio and Diana are condemned to die at the end of *The Robe*, but they die in the certain knowledge of their admission to the kingdom of heaven. This is symbolized in the movie by a choir singing ‘Hallelujah!’ At the end of the 1935 *Last Days of Pompeii*, Marcus (Preston Foster), converted to Christianity, has a dying vision of Christ, implying that he has been admitted into heaven.

But the salvation could also be universal. A common theme in Roman epic is that, regardless of the dreadful fate of the characters at the end, Christianity will come along and sort everything out. The 1951 *Quo Vadis* has a reassuring prologue, making clear that, whatever sufferings the Christians in this movie are about to go through, the religion will triumph, and become that of the Empire. This is seen even in movies with no explicit Christian content. *Spartacus*, set seventy years before the Christian era began, commences with a prologue that says:

> In the last century before the birth of the new faith called Christianity which was destined to overthrow the pagan tyranny of Rome and bring about a new society ...

### 11 The Christian Empire: absent without leave

One of the consequences of the way Hollywood vocabulary contrasted pagan Rome and Christian opponents of Rome was that it became problematic to make a movie set after the Empire had become Christianized in the fourth century CE. How could the Empire be both bad (because the Roman Empire was always bad) and good (because it was Christian) at the same time? As a result, there are few movies set in this era. In those that are, one solution is to dramatize the moment of Christianity’s triumph. This is what is done in Lionello De Felice’s 1962 movie *Costantino il grande* (known in English as *Constantine and the Cross*). Alternatively, there is the approach taken by Douglas Sirk’s *Sign of the Pagan* (1954), one of two movies to appear in 1954 that took as their subject the invasions of Attila the Hun (the other being Pietro Francisci’s *Attila*). Here the emperors, Theodosius (George Dolenz, father

---

59 Indeed, since Gallio’s conversion to Christianity follows that of his muscular slave, Demetrius (Victor Mature), one might see the thread as reintroducing homosexual undertones, until Diana proves that Gallio can still win the ladies over.
of Mickey) and Valentinian (Walter Coy), though nominally Christian, have slipped back into the pagan excess of their predecessors. It takes the virtuous Marcian (Jeff Chandler), to restore Christian values to the Empire. He also demonstrates his virility by winning over and marrying the pure (but very seductive) Empress Pulcheria (played by former prima ballerina Ludmilla Tchérina), despite her vow of chastity. Sign of the Pagan tries hard, but there is inevitably something that seems not right at the heart of its presentation of the later Roman Empire.

Other than this, movies about the later decades of the western Roman Empire are few and far between, apart from the thriving sub-genre of movies telling the story of Arthur in the historical context of the end of Roman Britain. One example of this latter group is Antoine Fuqua’s King Arthur. This movie, however, so traduces the Arthurian legend, what is known of late Roman Britain, and the historical characters it does include (e.g. Saint Germanus), that it becomes risibly absurd. Another example (and equally absurd in some ways in its filmed version) is The Last Legion.

12 Secularizing the epic: Christianity and Gladiator

When Anthony Mann filmed Fall of the Roman Empire, he reacted against the Christian message, arguing that Christianity was not that important in the Empire of the second century CE. As a result, references to Christianity in that movie are few, and subtle. There is no explicit mention of the religion in dialogue. Instead, when Marcus Aurelius’ confidant and advisor Timonides is killed, it is revealed that he has the Christian Chi-Ro pendant around his neck. Similar pendants are seen on some of the people burnt at the stake in the Forum Romanum at the end of the movie, but again, nothing is said.

When Ridley Scott came to make Gladiator, he took a similar approach. A short sequence featuring Christians being executed was filmed, but left out of the final cut (and not restored in the Extended Special Edition; it only appears as a deleted scene on the first DVD release). By Scott’s own admission, this is because the lion’s attack on the stuffed Christian martyrs is extremely unconvincing. But it is significant that the movie had no other references to Christians even filmed. Scott wasn’t interested in a movie about the early Church, it having been done many times before. And one rather suspects that an increasingly secular cinema audience would have little interest in that either.

60 The movie’s Marcian combines elements of two historical characters, Theodosius’ general and successor Marcian, and Valentinian’s general Aëtius, who beat Attila at the Battle of Châlons in 451 CE.

61 I omit any mention of movies dealing with the later history of the eastern or Byzantine Empire, not least because I don’t know of any. Even Ridley Scott’s Kingdom of Heaven (2005), set in the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades, leaves out any reference to the Byzantines.

62 I should add that it remains my view that this movie is absurd even if one doesn’t know anything about the history or mythology it travesties.

63 Dewey Gram’s novelization of Gladiator has two scenes of Christians being executed in the arena, one in Africa, and one in Rome. The scene in Rome is, pretty much, what Scott filmed and then left out of the final cut. The earlier scene in Africa looks to be a doublet of the later one in Rome – I suspect that there was some debate as to whether to put that scene in the Colosseum or in Africa, with the result that Gram ended up working from a script that had it in both. (As Nick Lowe has described, the script for Gladiator had a troubled history – David Franzoni originated the story and wrote his draft, which was then rejected once Ridley Scott came on board. Scott gave it to John Logan, and Logan’s script was in turn rejected by Russell Crowe immediately before shooting commenced, leading to William Nicholson being brought on board to produce a script to fit the pre-booked locations, which he had to write as the scenes were being filmed.)
This actually causes problems for *Gladiator*’s end. The issue of possible questions over Maximus’ virility is overcome through making him ultra-virile, and having him the object of unrequited lust from Lucilla (Connie Nielsen). But without Christianity to redeem the Empire, some other device is needed to send the audience out of the cinema with some sort of a smile on their faces, even though Maximus has died. Scott and his screenwriters solve this by having Marcus Aurelius’ dream of a restored Roman Republic be put into action at the end of the movie. Historically, this is nonsense, of course. But it is necessary for the drama to work with an audience, and should be considered in that light.

13 Voyeurism: sex and spectacle

As has often been observed, Roman epic provides many opportunities for prurient voyeurism, the condemnation of practices whilst enjoying observing their recreation. This falls into three broad categories – slavery, spectacle, and sex.

Though most pre-industrial societies accepted slavery as natural, and bonded servitude still exists in many parts of the world (including some closer to westerners than most like to admit), Rome is the society which most gets castigated for its evils. Both *Spartacus* and *The Robe* roundly condemn the practice in their prologues, and *Ben-Hur* also has scenes showing how evil slavery was. Yet depicting slavery, in the right contexts, provides plenty of opportunities for placing pretty innocent slave girls in peril from lecherous masters, or for Roman wives to ogle muscular men as they do as instructed. *Spartacus* has examples of both of these motifs. There is Crassus’ attempt to seduce Varinia, from which she is ironically saved by the sweaty old self-confessed lecher Gracchus. Earlier, Helena and Claudia Maria, Crassus’ female companions, salaciously demand that the handsomest gladiators fight for them, and that they do it stripped to the waist. The audience is invited to condemn the outrageous behaviour of these women, whilst, at least as far as the female members are concerned, enjoying the display.

Slavery elides easily into the gladiatorial spectacle, since most (though not all) gladiators were slaves, and this is certainly how cinema presents them. The arena features prominently in many movies, such as various versions of *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Quo Vadis*, and, of course, *Spartacus* and, later, *Gladiator*. *Demetrius and the Gladiators* appears to have been conceived as a means of giving *The Robe* sequence the one obvious feature of Roman epic that the earlier movie lacked (as well as providing comeuppance for the evil Caligula). Again, the audience is invited to enjoy the spectacle whilst morally condemning the sport. This is satirized in the 1967 *Star Trek* episode ‘Bread and Circuses’, where gladiatorial combats were set inside a television studio, with canned audience applause.64

Modern westerners tend to focus on the most alien of the Roman spectacles, the gladiatorial games, the killing of humans for sport. But in Roman times, chariot racing in the circus was more popular (the Circus Maximus in Rome could hold at least twice as many spectators as the Colosseum). Naturally, this sport does get into Roman epic. Most memorably, there are the spectacular races at Antioch in the 1925 and 1959 versions of *Ben-Hur* (though in the latter movie the race certainly goes on for too long). So impressive were these that other movie-makers seem to have shied away from attempting to replicate similar se-

---

quences, but chariot chases that reference Ben-Hur but instead take place through the countryside are common in other movies, such as Roman Scandals, Fall of the Roman Empire, and, reaching a high point of absurdity, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. It can even, with some justification, be suggested that the scene in Goldfinger (1964) where James Bond uses tyre slashers derives from the spiked wheel hubs of Messala’s chariot in Ben-Hur.

Finally, and this has already been touched upon, there is sex. Pagan Rome is synonymous to many with sex – the Romans were, by popular account, always at it. HBO’s Rome, full of nudity and sexual activity, is merely the most recent example of this. 65 Cecil B. DeMille’s silent Manslaughter (1922), a movie with a contemporary setting, includes a Roman orgy scene, prompted simply by one character musing about the Romans. In the comedy form, sexy smut fuels scenes in (amongst others) Roman Scandals, Up Pompeii and History of the World Part I.

It is hardly surprising, then, that, in the wake of Gladiator’s success, porn movies turned to the Roman world with some enthusiasm, in the form of the Private Gladiator trilogy (2001-2002), at the top end of the porn market in terms of production values (so not really very good), and Gladiator Erotics: The Lesbian Warriors (2001), a bit less ambitious (so really, really dreadful). Indeed, it was to capture the market for Roman porn that Penthouse owner Bob Guccione sunk money in Caligula, though Tinto Brass seems to have had loftier art-house ambitions. In these movies the virility of the hero in a skirt is established in the most emphatic terms. 66

The key figure for ancient sex appeal, of course, is Cleopatra. She combines the imagined Roman liberal attitude to sex with the added exoticism of oriental trappings. It is no surprise that she has fascinated movie-goers. The sexual allure has perhaps never been more blatant (in mainstream cinema) 67 than in the 1917 Cleopatra, where the queen was played by notorious ‘vamp’ Theda Bara, whose flimsy outfits concealed almost nothing. 68 In later years this was judged so scandalous that it could not be shown in American cinemas, resulting in only a small number of prints being kept, the last of which was destroyed in a fire in the 1950s. The most famous Cleopatra is Taylor’s from 1963, beautiful, if often annoying, and spending a lot of time not wearing much clothing. But mention should be made of Colbert’s

65 This was the subject of some controversy at the time, with author Tom Holland criticizing the series for emphasizing sex, and bringing up a number of ancient moralistic writers to demonstrate that the Romans actually disapproved of sex. However, one can also cite authors – the poet Ovid, for instance – who were all in favour of casual sex, and the truth no doubt lies between the two extremes: as in all societies, some Romans were licentious, whilst others disapproved.

66 It is also worth noting that the BBC edited the first three episodes of Rome into two, in such a way as to remove story elements, but to leave untouched the sex and nudity. RAI in Italy, on the other hand, had a separate cut removing all the nudity.

67 Naturally, porn has also picked up Cleopatra, in two Private Cleopatra movies (2003-2004). These are also science fiction, as they have a present day plot strand which revolves around the notion of resurrecting Cleopatra through her DNA.

68 There is a science fiction connection, as Julius Caesar was played by Fritz Leiber, Sr., father of Fritz Leiber, Jr., the creator of the fantasy world Lankhmar, beginning with the story ‘Two sought adventure’, published in Unknown in 1939.
self-confident queen in DeMille’s *Cleopatra*, complete with dramatic cleavage, Leigh’s bubbly teenager in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Amanda Barrie’s charming but clueless innocent in *Carry on Cleo*, or Monica Bellucci’s exotically under-dressed sexpot in *Astérix & Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre* (2002). Part of the appeal of Cleopatra is that, within certain boundaries, she can be many things to many different people – if you don’t care for one version of her, another movie may provide a version that is more to your taste.

14 Race

It may be observed that the Roman Empire seen in Hollywood epic is a very ‘white’ environment. About the only prominent black character is Woody Strode’s gladiator in *Spartacus*. This, it has been argued, is a misrepresentation of the more inclusive reality of the Roman Empire. After all, it is argued, there were black African troops in the Roman army, and Rome even had a black emperor, Septimius Severus.

Such a view oversimplifies. To start with the particular, to the statement that Septimius Severus was black, I have to say that it depends on what you mean by ‘black’. Severus’ inclusion in a list of 100 Great Black Britons alongside the likes of Mary Seacole and Sir Trevor Macdonald (and despite his only claim to Britishness being that he died in York), has made it natural to assume that he was of the same sub-Saharan ancestry as all the post-eighteenth century examples in that list. But he actually came from the Mediterranean coast, belonging to a political élite that had settled there from Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) a thousand years or so previously. No doubt the family had mixed with locals in the meantime, but he probably had some Italian blood in him as well. All his portraiture shows a typical ‘white’ Roman male, and though there would be some massaging of that public image, he probably looked more like Zinedine Zidane than Forrest Whittaker. The same applies, at least in some degree, to the troops that the Roman army recruited from the same area.

This leads to the general point. The Roman Empire is often held up as a tolerant multicultural society, lacking a ‘colour bar’, and in many respects it was. Members of local élites in North Africa or Gaul could rise through the system to positions of great authority within the Empire, whereas, for example, the son of a Maharajah could not hope to become Governor-General of Canada. But to do so they needed to conform to the Roman cultural identity, and this was as true for Septimius Severus as for anyone else. The Latin equivalent of ‘I’m black and I’m proud’ got one nowhere in the Roman Empire. And anyone who thinks that the Roman world was free of prejudice on the basis of ethnic origin should read the vile slanders that Juvenal hurls at Greeks in his *Third Satire*.

In the end, the Hollywood portrayal of the Roman Empire as basically ‘white’ isn’t that far off how the Romans thought of themselves.

15 Reading too much?

It could be argued that, in the preceding text, I am reading too much into the movies being discussed. I’m certainly not saying that every Hollywood epic was out to convey an overt moral or political message. But quite a lot of them were. This isn’t just me going out on a limb. It’s an opinion shared by noted critics, with a better understanding of the material

---

69 Not to mention recycling the iconography for other Egyptian or pseudo-Egyptian queens, such as in *Blood from the Mummy’s Tomb* (1971) or *Queen of the Damned* (2002).

70 Internet forums have apparently been much exercised with the question of whether it is more appropriate that the North African Hannibal be played by Denzel Washington or Vin Diesel.
than I have, such as Maria Wyke and Christopher Frayling. Moreover, it is something that people were explicit about at the time.

The additional 1944 prologue and epilogue for *Sign of the Cross* was plainly a deliberate attempt to give the movie a new contemporary relevance. Publicity for *Quo Vadis* in 1951 talked about the movie carrying a message of contemporary importance, 71 and I have already mentioned Huston’s avowed intention to draw parallels with the persecution of the Jews in the Third Reich. Moreover, I am also trying to convey the readings that people could bring to the movies, whether or not the creators intended them. Conservative commentators associated *The Robe* with their anti-Stalinist views. And it would be surprising if people in the 1950s watching movies set in imperial Rome, decorated with imperial eagles, and featuring imperial salutes, had not made associations with Mussolini and Fascism.

16 The end of epic

The 1963 *Cleopatra* bankrupted Twentieth-Century Fox. 72 The subsequent lukewarm reception for *Fall of the Roman Empire* signalled the end of the ancient epic genre. 73 Movies with Roman settings were still made, but they were often comedies, such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Up Pompeii*, or, later, Terry Jones’ *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), which is really a comic example of the New Testament epic genre. Otherwise, they were European art movies such as *Fellini Satyricon*, or Derek Jarman’s *Sebastiane* (1976). Lengthier historical narratives were taken up by television; examples are the BBC’s *I Claudius*, or the American *A.D.* (1985). The latter was a not entirely successful attempt to combine all the early Church narratives, both those set in the immediate aftermath of Jesus’ death (as, for example, *The Robe*) and those in the Neronian persecution (e.g. *Quo Vadis*), and to graft onto that the core of *I, Claudius*.

However, while all this was going on, the Roman Empire was being reused in science fiction. George Lucas’ *Star Wars* (1977) appropriates a great deal of its political terminology and history from Rome. Some of that is the result of the influence of Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* novels, works that borrowed heavily from Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 74 But Lucas was also influenced by epic movies. This is demonstrated most clearly in *The Phantom Menace* (1999), where the final parade through Naboo recreates many shots from Commodus’ arrival in Rome in *Fall of the Roman Empire*.

---

71 On this see Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, pp. 143-4.

72 The movie was budgeted at $2,000,000, but actually cost $44,000,000, more than twice as much as the previous most expensive movie, *Mutiny of the Bounty* (USA, Lewis Milestone, 1962) (figures from James Chapman, ‘Economic Film History’, *AA310 Book 1*, Open University, 2001, p. 67). It finally covered its cost in 1973, after which Fox ‘closed the books’ in order to avoid paying out to anyone promised percentages of any profits the movie might make.

73 The mid-1960s is often seen as the end of the epic, but in fact, *Cleopatra* and *Fall of the Roman Empire* only really saw the end of the ancient epic. Grand historical epics continued (e.g. *Doctor Zhivago*, 1965), and the epic tradition merged with that of the war movie.

17 The return of epic, and the future

*Gladiator* has already been mentioned frequently in this article. It is difficult to avoid. *Gladiator* carefully relates itself to just about every trend and feature ever seen in Roman epic, and no movie in the epic genre is quite so self-referential towards its predecessors. At heart, it is a remake of *Fall of the Roman Empire* (subtly linked to by casting Richard Harris, who had been set to play Commodus in the earlier movie, as Marcus Aurelius). To this are grafted on set pieces lifted from *Spartacus*, to which nods are made in the name, Gracchus, given to the leading opponent of Commodus (played by Joaquin Phoenix), and Maximus’ black best friend, Juba (Djimon Hounsou), paralleling Strode’s role in *Spartacus*. But time is found to refer to a wide range of other earlier works, some of which have already been noted. The casting of the BBC’s Claudius, Derek Jacobi, as Gracchus, is no more accidental than Kenneth Branagh’s casting of the same actor as Shakespeare’s Claudius in *Hamlet* (1996). The name of Maximus’ secretary, Cicero (Tommy Flanagan), is redolent with classical allusion, as is that of Senator Falco (David Schofield), for the many people who have read a Lindsay Davis novel. The man-unjustly-enslaved motif from *Ben-Hur* is repeated, as is *Quo Vadis’* use of the Gismondi model of Rome, in a sequence that, as already noted, picks up the common Romans-and-Nazis motif by stealing from Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*.

*Gladiator*’s spectacular success was thought to herald a rebirth of the historical epic. It didn’t quite happen that way. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) went down well with a specialist audience of a particular section of the devout, but for anyone else, it’s a tedious and over-long experience short of enlightening moments. The lukewarm critical reaction to, and, more importantly, indifferent or poor box office performance of, Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy*, Oliver Stone’s *Alexander, King Arthur*, and Scott’s own medieval epic *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), caused a number of other projects to stall. Doug Lefler’s *The Last Legion* had originally been expected to come out in 2006, but only finally went on release in the US in August 2007.75

In the meantime, HBO and the BBC collaborated on a mammoth television series, *Rome* (2005-2007), with a cast almost entirely consisting of Brits. Advertised as a new sort of Roman epic, the series scores points for the realistically grotty pre-medieval look of the city, in contrast to the gleaming marble classicism usually seen. *Rome* is, however, is not the first screen treatment to do this. *Fellini Satyricon* was there first, and seems to have influenced *Rome;* the theatre scene in the first episode of *Rome* has certainly been lifted from Fellini. *Imperium: Augustus* also has a similar portrait of the city.

Scratch the surface of *Rome*, and one finds a deeply traditional piece. The political machinations, and the portrayal of devious power-mad women advancing their sons, are straight out of *I Claudius*, whilst the old motif of Roman indulgence in sex and violence is paraded with the usual prurient relish. Octavian’s mother Atia (according to Tacitus, the most virtuous woman in Rome) is portrayed as a combination of Livia and Messalina, whilst incest appears again, this time between Octavian and his sister Octavia. About the only sex-

---

75 In the US very little in the way of publicity, and no preview screenings, suggesting that the distributors are aware that they have a bit of a turkey on their hands, though in Britain it was better promoted. Ostensibly about the last western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, this appears on the face of it to be an interesting attempt to set a movie in the Christianized Roman Empire; as noted above, this is not often done. But a quick scan of the character list and a knowledge of Valerio Massimo Manfredi’s source novel reveals it to be disguised Athuriana, and the final publicity posters remove the disguise, and capitalize on the Arthur connection. See now my weblog post ‘Four legionaries and a funeral’, [http://tonykeen.blogspot.com/2007/10/four-legionaries-and-funeral.html](http://tonykeen.blogspot.com/2007/10/four-legionaries-and-funeral.html) [accessed October 2007].
ual novelty is the explicit lesbian side of Octavia’s sexuality. One could mention Rome’s combination of an élite perspective, and the more proletarian view of two centurions (fictionalized versions of historical characters, briefly mentioned in Caesar’s Gallic Wars). This technique has been used in war movies at least as far back as The Longest Day, but it’s relatively new to ancient epic. But I for one found that the two strands tended to get in the way of each other, resulting in a show that was never sure whether it wanted to be a Roman Upstairs Downstairs or I Claudius for the twenty-first century.76

Nevertheless, Rome was commercially, and to a degree critically, successful, and its success probably resulted in some more projects being greenlit, such as Roman Polanski’s movie of Robert Harris’ Pompeii, which was due to begin filming in 2008, but now seems to have fallen though, with Polanski withdrawing from the project. The impressive box office returns of Zack Snyder’s 300, which belongs as much in the fantasy tradition of The Lord of the Rings as in the epic tradition of Gladiator, added more. (Though probably only Vin Diesel still thinks his Hannibal the Conqueror has a chance of being among these.) Some of these movies will probably be okay, others will be dreadful. The one thing that we can be sure of is, to paraphrase Boris Johnson,77 that people will keep making movies about Rome.

Filmography

If you’re interested in pursuing any of the movies discussed in this article, the four key 1950s epics are Quo Vadis, The Robe (Demetrius and the Gladiators is inessential, unless you have a thing for Susan Hayward),78 Ben-Hur and Spartacus. The Fall of the Roman Empire is not wholly successful, but it is thoughtful, and repays repeated watching. Cleopatra (1963) can be fun, especially once Burton (in Gideon Nisbet’s words, a famous drunk played by a famous drunk) comes on screen, but it’s an endurance test. To these must of course be added Gladiator, but I wouldn’t bother with many other recent movies. (Avoid King Arthur – there’s better Keira Knightley porn on the Internet.) Of the comedies, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum has its moments, but pales next to a good stage production, and Up Pompeii is a shadow of the television series (which has not itself aged as well as one might hope). But Carry on Cleo and Life of Brian, with very different senses of humour, both continue to delight. Roman Scandals has much of interest, including Busby Berkeley routines, and a young Lucille Ball, chained up naked with her fellow chorus girls. Finally, I Claudius remains the benchmark for television productions. I know the porn movies only by repute.

Bibliography

This doesn’t attempt to be a comprehensive bibliography, but just lists the books I had to hand when writing this article. As a general guide to movie history I used Mark Cousins, The Story of Film (London: Pavilion Books, 2004), but Cousins is clearly not interested in epic films as a genre. Mark C. Carnes (ed.), Past Imperfect: History according to the Movies (New York: Henry Holt, 1995) is a weighty collection of pieces comparing Hollywood versions with what actually happened — it tends towards nitpicking, but is a nice place to start from (and was a gift from the editors of the fanzine in which this article originally appeared). When Jon Solomon, The Ancient World in the Cinema (New Haven: Yale University Press, revised and expanded edition, 2001), first appeared in 1978, there was nothing on the subject at all. The book tries to be comprehensive, which means that few movies get detailed treatment, but it is useful if you want to know just how many movies there are out there, and is the sort of work that the field needs to build upon. The best example of a more detailed study is Maria Wyke, Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History (London: Routledge, 1997), so good that others are still scared of tackling the areas (Spartacus, Cleopatra, Nero, and Pompeii) she focuses on. If you’re

76 A year later, the BBC also broadcast Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire, a six-part docudrama series that can be criticized on the grounds of oversimplifying, and of giving unwarranted authority to one particular interpretation of history.

77 Boris Johnson, The Dream of Rome (2006), p. 199: ‘We will never reproduce the Roman Empire ... But if history teaches us anything it is that we are fated never to stop trying.’

78 Not in itself an invalid lifestyle choice.
lucky enough to have access to a library with Open University course material, AA309 *Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire* includes a video sequence by Wyke on ‘Promoting the Present: The Roman Empire in ’50s and ’60s Hollywood’, where she looks at *The Robe* and *Fall of the Roman Empire*. Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) is an updated version of his 1991 collection *Classics and Cinema* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press); it’s heavier on the Greek side than the Roman, but includes some interesting pieces. Winkler has edited two collections, *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), and *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); I’ve also used his article, ‘Cinema and the Fall of Rome’, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 125 (1995), pp. 135-54, which focuses on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Monica Silveira Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), is an undergraduate textbook, complete with essay questions, focussing on nine of the most often studied movies. Recent books that I had not yet seen when I wrote this piece include Arthur J. Pomeroy, *Then It Was Destroyed by the Volcano*: *The Ancient World in Film and on Television* (London: Duckworth, 2008), and Monica Silveira Cyrino (ed.), *Rome. Season One: History Makes Television* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), a collection of essays on the HBO series (I am slightly disturbed that *Rome* has its own collection of essays whilst, as far as I know, no such collection exists for *I Claudius*).  

The 1917 *Cleopatra* is discussed in Frank Thompson, *Lost Films: Important Movies that Disappeared*, pp. 68-78 (whilst Mark Campbell, *The Pocket Essential Carry On Films* [Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2002], pp. 36-8, is a start for *Carry On Cleo*). The DVD box set of *I Claudius* includes ‘The Epic that Never Was’, a 1965 documentary that is an essential source on the uncompleted Alexander Korda/Joseph Von Sternberg potential masterpiece. I used a couple of works that touch on Roman movies, though it’s not their main subject: Simon Goldhill, *Love, Sex & Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes Our Lives* (London: John Murray, 2004) is good on the use of Rome as a negative model, whilst Gideon Nisbet’s splendid *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2006, 2nd edn, 2008) includes many useful observations on Roman movies, while contrasting them with those set in Greece. Lastly, Robin Lane Fox’s *The Making of Alexander* (Oxford: R&L, 2004) mainly does what it says on the tin, and contains nothing directly about Roman movies at all; but it has a final chapter, ‘History and Fiction’, that anyone who has ever complained about historical inaccuracies in movie should be forced to read. (Of course, several further books have appeared since 2007, of which perhaps the most important are Jeffrey Richards, *Hollywood’s Ancient Worlds*, 2008, and Martin M. Winkler, *Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo’s New Light* (2009).]