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The Roman Epics of Classical Hollywood: *Quo Vadis* (1951)

Introduction

Prior to the success of *Gladiator* in 2000, mentioning classical antiquity on film was certain to invoke thoughts of the epic films produced in the post-Second World War period by Hollywood studios. Mostly set in Rome, these films often employed the same central plot device: an upstanding but pagan Roman soldier is converted to Christianity through love for a chaste Christian maiden, and is subsequently instrumental in the defeat of a decadent emperor (or his representative). Their stocklist of characters and events became core signifiers for cine-antiquity: evil emperors and vampish scheming empresses; brave gladiators and innocent virgins; crowd scenes and banquets; chariot races and arena combats. Persisting in popularity over time and appealing to broadly constituted audiences, the dominance of this style in re-presenting antiquity on film is such that viewers seem more likely to measure 'authenticity' by inclusion of the visual precedents they established than by any adherence to historical facts.

The Roman epics were large-scale productions, hugely expensive to produce with their vast crowds of extras, extravagant costume and set design, innovative use of technology, and prestige casts. In addition to *Quo Vadis* (the focus for analysis in this chapter), titles included *The Robe* (1953), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). Their expense and extravagance makes them especially interesting as illustrations of the influence of commercial factors on representations of antiquity. In brief, the more that a film costs to produce, the more it will be expected to return that outlay in box-office takings. This agenda prompts more promotion and wider dissemination of the product, but also a more conservative approach to morality and representation. Such large-scale productions were also associated with the prestige and reputations of the studios, both because of their technical virtuosity and their economic scale. Their 'event' status made them ideal candidates for awards, which in turn encouraged their more widespread and longer-lasting dissemination. It was the dominance of the studio system in post-war Hollywood that made epic film production economically possible, and encouraged its hegemony over cine-antiquity: but it also threatened to halt the creative evolution of representations of its most popular topics.

Filmmaking has always been commercially driven, and as cinema grew in technical sophistication, this became more explicitly foregrounded. The expense of equipment and increasingly large number of personnel needed to produce a film made small studios economically unviable. They folded or were swallowed up by their better-funded peers. By the late 1920s, Hollywood was dominated by five major studios, with another two minor studios. These studios owned not only the means to produce films, but also the cinema chains in which they were mostly exhibited and an extensive and efficient publicity machine to sell their films to the public. In addition, they held popular actors under contract to perform only in their films. The studios could dictate which films were shown and in what order they appeared in the programme. They could force independent cinemas to pay for films that they did not want in order to get a chance to screen high profile films like epics, which would have been pre-sold to the viewing public as events in themselves. Despite legislation in 1948 to break the studios' monopoly over exhibition, the major studios still wielded significant power until the mid-1960s when the advance of television and changes in audience demographics dictated a reassessment of commercial practices. Epic films had their part to play in this story of the rise and fall of the studio system. Famously, the enormously expensive 1963 epic *Cleopatra*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, has often been said to have almost bankrupted Twentieth Century Fox.

For the studios, Roman epic films were not just attractive because they were popular with audiences. In their narratives of power and spectacle, they stood as a metaphor for the power of the studios themselves; in particular, their power to recreate and to control previously unseen worlds. For the audiences, the attraction was more straightforward. In a post-war world still in the grip of austerity measures, they offered the chance to escape into a world of luxury, decadence and spectacle: monumental, finely-decorated buildings; muscular men in gleaming breastplates; beautiful women decked in jewels and dressed in exquisite brightly-coloured fabrics; and, perhaps above all for a hungry audience, the feasts, with their tables spilling over with fresh fruit and roasted meats. The display of all this extravagance was well suited to show off the capacity of new film technologies such as Widescreen, Cinemascope, and Technicolor. And in turn, the possession and use of such new technologies once again showed off the power of the studios.

Pinning down a definition of an epic film is not as easy as one might imagine. In 2008, the American Film Institute listed their top ten epic films (of which two are set in ancient Rome and another one in Biblical times). Their definition of epic film is 'a genre of large-scale films set in a cinematic interpretation of the past'. This definition seems rather sweeping, but in fact discounts many films that viewers would consider epic: for instance, science-fiction and fantasy films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Star Wars* (1977), or the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003).

Genre definitions are always difficult. The film scholar Richard Maltby has noted that while 'audiences, producers and critics all discuss movies in generic terms ... they often mean something very different by them' (2003: 74). However, we can point to some key characteristics which, if lacking, make it difficult to describe a film as epic.

An epic film is certainly a production on a large scale, in terms of budget, resources, locations and often casts (prestige as well as numbers). This dictates a presentation in which spectacle and grandeur are foregrounded, making the ancient world with its monumental architecture and extravagant emperors an ideal topic for epic film. However the success (as an epic) of a film like *Reds* (1981), ninth in the American Film Institute's top ten list, shows that grandeur does not have to derive from material wealth and show. The film recounted the life of John Reed, an American journalist who chronicled the Russian Revolution. Here, and in other epic films that do not include visual opulence, it is a grandeur of themes that makes the film 'epic'. The genre requires a narrative that connects its characters to great turning points or influential ideas in the history of mankind, though within the on-screen narrative the characters themselves may have only an inkling of the significance. The fact that epic films tend to be set against a backdrop of well-known historical events puts us as viewers into a particularly privileged position, assured in our ability to assess the outcome of events far better than the on-screen characters themselves. Thus epic films can serve a particular function for audiences by enabling us to review, assess and validate our histories, identities, and cultural communities.

All of the Roman epic films are broadly 'historical'. However, their narratives adapt historical fiction rather than historiography: a key point to remember, given the criticism often levied that they are historically inaccurate. Narratives were mostly drawn from highly successful popular novels like Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis?*, General Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur*, and Lloyd C. Douglas' *The Robe*. These novels integrated fictional characters with genuine historical figures and events, and had few qualms about reshaping the latter if it was necessary to fit the purposes of the narrative. Some had already been adapted to live performances for popular audiences as 'toga dramas', or had previously been adapted for the cinema, so the films were able to build on popular awareness of the narratives and established conventions for live action re-presentations. The trend for film adaptations from literature also extended in the same period to smaller-scale films set in ancient Rome: *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945), *Androcles and the Lion* (1952) and *Julius Caesar* (1953), for instance, were all adapted from well-known plays.

Seemingly paradoxically, film epic was never particularly interested in ancient epic. Even the best-known ancient epics – the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* – were mostly avoided by Hollywood, despite widespread popular knowledge of their stories. One reason for this may be found in the fact

that the epic poems draw their narratives and characters from mythology. Classical Hollywood's primary drive for realism could not easily accommodate the gods, heroes and monsters of ancient myth. One borderline exception is *Ulysses* (1954), a joint US/Italian production starring Kirk Douglas, filmed in Italy with an Italian crew and mostly Italian cast, and scripted by Hollywood writers Hugh Gray (historical adviser on *Quo Vadis*), Ben Hecht, and Irwin Shaw. The film has been critically acclaimed as an intelligent and thoughtful adaptation of Homer's poem, capturing much of the fantastic quality of the *Odyssey* but (like the 1956 *Helen of Troy*, another US/Italian production) it does not have the narrative or visual feel of a Hollywood epic film. Another possible exception is *Troy* (2004) which combined events from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for its plot, but set them in a quasi-historical setting, eschewing the gods and rationalising the supernatural.

The dominance of Rome over Greece as a location for historical epic films has been much noted. Derek Elley (1984: 52) suggests a number of reasons why this may be the case, including the absence of an imperial age, and the lack of dramatic events, with the development of Greek civilisation being rather 'a tale of perpetual adaptation'. Nevertheless, there were two attempts to produce Greek historical epic films in the post-war period, neither very successful at the time of their release: *Alexander the Great* (1956) and *The 300 Spartans* (1962). Reasons for their relative failure (compared with the Roman epics) may be found in stylistic flaws: *Alexander the Great*, for instance, takes a highly earnest approach and forgets to entertain its viewers, while *The 300 Spartans* places a juvenile couple as prime movers of the narrative – in keeping with the dominance of teenagers in films of the times, but inappropriate for the conservative epic film audience (see Chapter 5 for further discussion). Interestingly, the resurgence of the ancient world epic film in the twenty-first century has seen the same historical narratives used by two new epic films: *Alexander* (2004) takes as its focus the career of the Macedonian conqueror, Alexander the Great, and *300* (2007) retells the defence of the pass at Thermopylae by a small force of Spartans.

This popularity in cinema of a small number of historical narratives and settings, and their reappearance at particular times, gives us a clue to the special utility of Rome as a setting for epic films in the post-war period. The stories of both Alexander and Thermopylae involve the victory of Greece (standing for the western world) over the Persians (standing here for Orientalism and the East). Recent epic films featuring these narratives appeared at a time of East-West conflict (oil-driven wars in the Middle East, the rise of radical Islam). Similarly, the post-war Roman epics were released into a world seeking validation for the sacrifices of the Second World War and the potential for further losses threatened by the Cold War between the western nations (especially the USA) and the Communist Eastern bloc. They used narratives of the sacrifices of early Christians to

describe the (morally justified) triumph of freedom and democracy over tyranny. Visual and verbal parallels figured Roman emperors as Nazis, Fascists and Communists, and early Christian converts as god-fearing Americans. *Quo Vadis* is an especially good example of this trope.

The Roman epics of post-war Hollywood cinema have been so dominant in creating popular perceptions of the ancient world that it is surprising to discover how few there actually were: it is a struggle to list a dozen between *Quo Vadis* in 1951 and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1964, even including such borderline examples as Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953). Why is it that these films are so well embedded in the popular imagination? Partly this is to do with the commercial impulse: the large-scale promotions needed to attract greater audiences, the major awards, conservative family-friendly (for the main part) morality and apparent educational value have prompted repeat screenings on television, often at holiday times when they occupy long swathes of the programme schedule and large audiences can be guaranteed. Narratives of early Christianity like *Quo Vadis* and *Ben Hur* have become staples of network television at Easter, for instance. However, it is more than just repetition and prestige that has produced the popular audience's ongoing affection for Roman epics. With their spectacular sets, grandiose narrative ambitions, attractive casting and all-round exuberance they remain, above all, great entertainment.

Background to case study

The immediate source for the 1951 film was the historical novel *Quo Vadis?* by the Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916), first published as a serial in Polish daily papers in 1895. The title was drawn from the Christian tradition of a revelation to the apostle Peter as he fled from Nero's persecutions. As he left Rome, a vision of Christ appeared to him. He asked the vision, 'Quo vadis, domine?' ('Where are you going, master?') Christ replied that, because Peter was abandoning his people, he was returning to Rome to be crucified a second time. Peter turns back to return to Rome in the understanding that this is where the church will be established, despite his own inevitable death on Nero's orders. *Quo Vadis?* was a huge international success, being translated into more than 50 different languages. However Sienkiewicz was better known in his home country for a series of historical novels set in Old Poland. In 1905, he received a Nobel Prize for Literature for his 'outstanding merits as an epic writer'.

The novel weaves the fictitious romance of the Roman Marcus Vinicius and the Christian Lygia into a backdrop of events and figures drawn from Roman and early Christian history. The far from straightforward course of this romance is used as a vehicle to showcase the decadence of Rome, led by its emperor Nero. In particular, the effects of that decadence and

corruption on good intelligent men are drawn out in the central figure of Petronius, Vinicius' uncle and Nero's 'Arbiter of Elegance'. Love and lust are identified as competing principles for a good life, and respectively associated with Christian monotheism and Roman pantheism. Vinicius eventually embraces the love of Christ and receives the earthly rewards of love from Lygia and her rescue from a public and particularly brutal death. Though he shuns the new religion, Petronius is finally redeemed by love for his Greek slave Eunice, and a good death by his own hand. Nero remains a victim of his lustful desires and cowardice, and cannot reconcile himself to his inevitable death; instead he dies in violence and terror.

Translated into English, the full title of the novel was given as *Quo Vadis?: A Narrative of the Time of Nero.* In the context of nineteenth-century conflicts between the intellectual trend towards rationalism and popular adherence to a more literal and historically-based Christianity, Nero was a significant figure. Long identified in Christian narrative traditions as the 'anti-Christ', he offered a potent symbol of oppressive and anti-religious forces for a popular audience. In addition, given the topics of Sienkiewicz's other novels, the novel has been read as a patriotic allegory of Catholic Poland's struggle against imperialist oppressors Germany, Austria, and Russia. Thus the main narrative source for the film was already, as a literary text, subject to interpretation as a vehicle for the discussion of modern political and moral conflicts.

Sienkiewicz drew on several ancient sources for the historical events and characters of his novel, in particular Tacitus and Suetonius. Tacitus is the main source for the figure around which the narrative operates: Gaius Petronius. Petronius has been identified as the author of the *Satyricon* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 8) and is described by Tacitus as Nero's 'Arbiter of Elegance', his guide in matters of taste and culture (*Annals* 16.18). Nero's favour drew the enmity of Tigellinus, the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard and another of Nero's inner circle, who convinced the emperor that Petronius had been involved with conspirators against him. According to Tacitus (16.19) Petronius chose to pre-empt his inevitable demise by opening his own veins, and before dying composed a scurrilous letter to Nero listing the emperor's depravities and those who had been his partners in them. In the novel, this letter is given content not described in the historical sources: referring to Nero murdering his mother, brother and wife, but claiming that his greater crime is his despoilment of the arts: poetry, music and dance. The film repeats this revisionary strategy, citing, in a final flourish of ironic detachment, Nero's abysmal songs and poems as the reason for Petronius' suicide.

The influence of Tacitus can also be seen in the cinematic Nero's decision to deflect blame for the devastating Great Fire of Rome that destroyed more than half the city from himself to the (already unpopular) Christians (15.44). Suetonius also mentions the fire, stating openly that Nero was responsible (*Life of Nero* 38). He comments approvingly on the

oppression of the Christians (16), although unlike Tacitus, he does not link the two. However, it is Suetonius' descriptions of Nero's vices that have most influence on Sienkiewicz's emperor: prowling the streets of Rome at night provoking violent brawls; murdering his mother Agrippina and adopted brother Britannicus, among others. More minor historical figures mentioned in Suetonius also appear in the novel: for instance, Locusta the poisoner; Phaon, Sporus, and Epaphroditus, members of Nero's household. Phaon retains a notional place in the 1951 film as the name of the architect responsible for the new Rome that will rise in the place of the fire.

The popular success of *Quo Vadis?* as a novel made it an unsurprising choice for early cinematic adaptation. After a very early one-reeler made by Pathé in 1901 which presented a sequence of tableaux from the book, the first proper film version was made by the Italian Cines Company, directed by Enrico Guazzoni and released in 1913. A six-reel film playing at the unusual (for the time) length of two hours, the film has become recognised as a milestone in film history for its genuinely cinematic adaptation of a literary narrative, and use of a variety of points-of-view to develop unprecedented depth in its storytelling. A remake was released in 1924, also made in Italy by the German director Georg Jacoby and the Italian Gabriellino d'Annunzio (son of the Italian poet and nationalist, Gabriele d'Annunzio, who had his own role in the history of epic cine-antiquity through his involvement in the seminal 1914 epic *Cabiria*). Released into a Fascist Italy which had adopted ancient Rome as its patriotic model, its portrayal of a decadent Roman society and governing regime did not mesh with the spirit of the times and it was not well received by critics or viewers. After this failure, the next *Quo Vadis* was the 1951 film, the first American adaptation of Sienkiewicz's novel.

The 1951 film retains the narrative framework of the novel, but telescopes the timescale and reduces the extent to which a number of key characters feature. In particular, the apostles Peter and Paul, and their mirror image, the traitorous 'philosopher' Chilo Chilonides are diminished. These three characters are key to the novel's proselytising tone, so become mostly surplus given the film's lighter touch on the topic of religion. The character of Marcus is revised to better fit the expectations of a modern audience about how a hero should behave: for instance, incidents in the novel where he kills a slave in anger and viciously punishes others are not included. Poppaea is also revised in keeping with audience expectations, becoming a more stereotypical evil female, a vamp. She is without sympathy in the film, being totally motivated by adulterous lust for Vinicius. In contrast, the novel treats her in a more even-handed fashion providing a backstory about the death of her infant daughter and her superstitious belief that Lygia was to blame to explain her antipathy. Audience expectations and conventions also inform the religious scenes: Jesus is not shown speaking directly, and we do not see his face; except when Peter describes the Last Supper, when an onscreen enactment of Da

Vinci's familiar painting provides a legitimising cultural filter. There are changes in the film to the timing of events for the sake of narrative economy. For instance, the novel follows the historical sources in placing the death of Seneca before that of Petronius. In the film Petronius dies before Seneca, allowing the latter to convey the Arbiter's letter to Nero. Finally there are revisions which give the narrative a better fit with the timely themes by which the narrative is governed: Nero is played as a figure of ridicule, an echo of the propaganda strategies used to deflate the image of that more recent political bogeyman, Adolf Hitler. This also gives the film a humorous element, an important part of the most successful epic films, reducing some of the inevitable pomposity that accompanied the grand themes and moral lessons.

Two key themes inform the 1951 cinematic adaptation of Sienkiewicz's narrative, both concerning an ideological conflict: freedom versus tyranny, and Christianity versus paganism. They were especially timely given the date of the film's release, soon after the end of the Second World War and while the ideological conflict of the Cold War was at its height. Having such clear and purposeful themes served as an authorising strategy, almost a moral justification, for the cuts and revisions made to the characters and plot of the original text. Nothing should stand in the way of telling such an important and evangelising story.

As with all films, it is crucially important to situate *Quo Vadis* in the circumstances of its production. Rights to film the text were obtained by MGM Studios before the outbreak of the Second World War, and a variety of directors, writers, and leading actors were proposed and discarded before the production began shooting. In 1949, shooting was scheduled to begin with John Huston writing and directing, and the lead roles played by Gregory Peck and Elizabeth Taylor. However, Peck was hospitalised with an eye infection, and the prospect of holding up an expensive and complicated shooting schedule resulted in postponement. By the time shooting actually began in 1950, Huston's politically-driven script had been replaced by one that put more focus on the religious aspects of the story, though, as we shall see, it still retained a political message.

The cast had also changed. In the leading roles were the robustly American Robert Taylor as Marcus Vinicius, the English rose Deborah Kerr as Lygia, and the English-born (with polyglot European ancestry) Peter Ustinov as Nero. Previously proposed candidates to play Nero, the film's villain, had included Wallace Beery, Orson Welles, Charles Laughton (who had already played the character in DeMille's 1932 film, *Sign of the Cross*), and Robert Morley. Like Ustinov, Laughton and Morley were both British, recalling the aural casting conventions already noted in Chapter 1. There were good economic reasons for this: assets frozen in Europe as part of the post-war economic reconstruction could be released in the form of actors' fees paid in sterling. Such casting did nothing to discourage the audience's opinion that nothing said moral decadence and

imperial decline like a British accent. At least, such was the case in a male character; conversely, the same accent in a leading female character signified purity. To complete the paradigm, the male heroic lead would usually be played by an American actor. However, usage of these conventions was developing into something more nuanced than the original 'British, bad: American, good'. They had become a subtle way of reinforcing the cultural and (increasingly) political imperialism of the USA, with America shown as the new way that would both sweep away the corruption of power-wielders in the Old World, and simultaneously liberate its people (represented by the female lead).

The use of such conventions put the emphasis on individual characters as fundamental building blocks in the viewer's understanding of the narrative. This focus on the desires and characteristics of the individual as motivation for narrative action was key to a larger system of representational conventions which governed the way that the ancient world (and all other cinematic 'worlds') were presented in Hollywood cinema. The system has become known as the 'classical Hollywood style'. Films produced by Hollywood studios in the period from the end of the First World War to the beginning of the 1960s were subject to certain rules for narrative style. These emphasised regular and predictable causality, linearity of time and space, and psychological motivations as drivers for narrative action. In other words, they sought to produce cinematic representations which seemed to mimic real life: an 'invisible cinema' that situated the viewer as eavesdropper, an unseen watcher seated in the dark of the cinema. In turn, the need to artificially disguise the artifice of cinema dictated the way that shots were staged, lit, and edited. For example, key characters in a scene will be centred in the foreground, in focus and clearly lit. Dialogue between two characters is often edited into a shot/reverse shot sequence, with shots of each character alternated as they take their turn to speak, mimicking the way that we might look at each speaker in turn. The purpose of editing is to promote continuity: to make each action within a scene and each scene within the larger narrative seem to follow inevitably. This imperative for naturalism also promoted the use of more colloquial dialogue and accents, contributing, in the case of examples of cine-antiquity of the period, to the notion that the ancient world was just the same as the modern world, but in fancy dress. As a result, antiquity was as good a location for the discussion of modern moral and social concerns as any modern setting.

Principal photography on *Quo Vadis* was completed at the Cinecittà studios in Rome. The notion of 'authentic' location shooting was not the primary driver here: unlike *Jason and the Argonauts*, for example, *Quo Vadis* did not have a narrative reason to shoot amongst ancient architectural ruins (see discussion in Chapter 6). However, the same post-war economic reconstruction policies that made employing British actors advantageous also imposed limits on the amount of money that American

businesses could take out of the local Italian economy. With audiences hungry for the escapism of the cinema and a ruined home film industry, Hollywood was making good returns in Italy which it could not export. Turning it into value-added exportable products like expensive epic films was a clever way to move the money back home. In news stories seeded by the studio's publicists, this commercial strategy was retold as a heroic tale of generous America coming to the rescue of broken Europe with stories of rebuilding the studios before filming could begin, feeding hungry children with leftover food from the banquet scenes, and providing work for thousands of locals as extras.

Another strand of pre-publicity aimed to give the film the authority of an educational text by emphasising academic connections and the extensive research that had gone into the script. The academic background of the researcher Hugh Gray is particularly highlighted in studio publicity. Gray had studied Classics at Oxford, and went on to be involved in the writing of other historical epic films, including *Ulysses* (1954) and *Helen of Troy* (1956). In the early stages of the film's production, Gray worked closely with John Huston to produce a script that was historically valid (though not necessarily historically accurate). The amount of research in ancient sources that he had undertaken was claimed to total four volumes of notes, which according to studio publicity, were to be handed over to the University of Rome on the film's completion. However, after Huston was removed from the project, Gray's contribution was downgraded to an advisory role. In the final film, he does not have a writing credit, but is named as 'historical adviser and lyrics composer'.

The huge costs involved in producing *Quo Vadis* called for an equally hyperbolic campaign to attract audiences on its release, including a vast number of commercial tie-ins. Publicity emphasised the great quantities involved in the film's production: an excess of extras, sets, costs, and research. However, the notion of excess was most accessible to the viewer in the sheer spectacle and luxury that the film presented to them onscreen. From the gleaming breastplates of the Roman soldiers through to the monumental architecture of ancient Rome, the extravagance of the feasts and the glamour of the dresses worn by the female leads – and all in glorious Technicolor. By March 1954, *The Hollywood Reporter* was able to report that the film had recouped its production costs, and it was not until April 1956 that the *Daily Variety* reported the final booking in a screening run that had been continuous since its first premieres in late 1951.

Of course, it was not possible to please everyone. The film had mixed reviews from the critics. Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* called it 'a staggering combination of cinema brilliance and sheer banality, of visual excitement and verbal boredom'. It received eight nominations for Academy Awards, but failed to win any. Nevertheless, in more than half a century since it was made, *Quo Vadis* has maintained an attraction for new audiences for its extravagant and enticing vision of antiquity. In

particular through its regular television screenings, it has continued to exert an influence on popular ideas about ancient Rome and its emperors.

Plot summary

Returning from a successful military campaign, the Roman commander Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) meets Lygia (Deborah Kerr), daughter of a conquered foreign king and hostage of Rome, now adopted daughter of Aulus Plautius and his wife Pomponia. All three are secretly members of the new sect of Christianity. Entering Rome in triumph, Marcus confides his desire for Lygia to his cynical and world-weary uncle Petronius (Leo Genn), the 'Arbiter of Elegance' for the emperor Nero (Peter Ustinov). On Petronius' advice, Lygia is removed from her adopted family and taken to Nero's palace, where she is dressed for a feast by Acte (Rosalie Crutchley), Nero's former mistress. At the feast she is seated with Marcus, but catches the eye of Nero's empress Poppaea (Patricia Laffan), who desires Marcus for herself. Nero tells Lygia that she is his gift to Marcus and, despite her horror, orders that she be taken to his house. On the way there, the litter is ambushed by Ursus (Buddy Baer), Lygia's giant protector, and the girl disappears.

Meanwhile, Petronius realises that his slave Eunice (Marina Berti) is in love with him, and takes her with him to Antium where Nero has taken the court. On his uncle's advice, Marcus consults the soothsayer Chilo about Lygia's disappearance. He takes Marcus, with Croton the wrestler as bodyguard, to a secret meeting of Christians where the apostles Paul and Peter preach about the life of Christ. They follow Lygia and her companions home through the streets of Rome. But Ursus detects them, knocks Marcus out and kills Croton. Marcus awakes to find Lygia nursing him. She admits she loves him, and he proposes marriage, even agreeing to adopt Christianity. However, Lygia's declaration that she loves Christ equally to Marcus sparks another row. Marcus storms off to join Petronius and Eunice in Antium with Nero – and Poppaea.

However, their peace is broken by the message that Rome is on fire. Nero and his circle watch the flames from the roof of his palace, while the emperor sings of the burning of Troy. Meanwhile Marcus finds Lygia through the panicking mob, and leads many to the safety of the river. The mob accuse Nero of starting the fire and, on Poppaea's jealous advice, he blames it on the Christians and orders their arrest. Petronius decides to end his own life before Nero orders it, and Eunice chooses to join him in death.

Peter leaves Rome but, after seeing a vision of Christ, decides to return to an inevitable martyrdom. Lygia is arrested along with her adopted parents and other Christians. Marcus tries to free her, but is also thrown into prison. They witness the deaths of their Christian friends in the arena including Pomponia, who is killed by lions and Aulus Plautius who is

burned at the stake. Lygia is tied to a stake to face a bull while Marcus is forced to watch from the emperor's box. However Ursus kills the bull, and the crowd demand their release, against Nero's wishes. Marcus announces the arrival of Galba to overthrow Nero, and the people respond by attacking the imperial palace. Nero kills Poppaea, but does not have the courage to kill himself, having to rely on Acte's help. As the film closes, Marcus and Lygia are leaving Rome to start their life together.

Key scenes and themes

Decadence and spectacle

While Sienkiewicz's novel was subtitled in some translations as 'A Tale of the Christ', LeRoy's film should perhaps have been labelled 'A Tale of the Anti-Christ'. Despite its ostensible moral focus on a virtuous Christianity, the real star of the film is the outrageous emperor Nero and his extravagantly immoral court. In the ambivalent, but undeniably entertaining, world of Hollywood cinema, audiences were cynically enabled to have their cake and eat it too. Spectacular Roman epic films encouraged them to congratulate themselves on their own virtuousness, while simultaneously enjoying the glamour of onscreen decadence. Rome's corrupt ethics and profligate luxury are made explicit in the sequence where Lygia is taken to an evening's entertainment at the imperial court [see box: 'Nero's feast']. The scene is narratively crucial in establishing Lygia's righteous Christian virtue, but the main attractions for viewers lie in the sex, violence, excess, and spectacle.

The corrupt decadence of the Roman court is illustrated in every aspect of this sequence: the crowd's enthusiasm for the death of the wrestler; the lewd public behaviour; Poppaea's approval and promotion of adultery (for herself and her husband); the excessive eating and drinking; and the idea that some humans are chattels to be exchanged as rewards for military service, regardless of their own wishes. Romans are also distinguished from Christians in their attitude to religion, with the emperor referred to as a living god.

Lygia is distanced from this world in a number of ways: physically by her refusal to take part in the drinking, carousing and violent spectatorship, and morally by her (to Marcus, incomprehensible) horror at Nero's assumption that her virtue is in his gift. Cinematically, she is also distanced by her placement in the shots: she is frequently placed at the bottom right of the frame and facing away from the camera, set apart from the Roman men and the events they are approvingly watching. Head and shoulder shots are in soft focus, presenting her as a softer and more fragile character than other hard-edged partygoers, especially Poppaea. She and Poppaea are also compared through their costumes. Both wear blue, but Poppaea's dress is a pale, silvery-blue, shining satin, giving the impression

Nero's feast

Lygia and Acte enter a room filled with music, dancing, laughter, and colour. Lygia is led to a couch, passing scantily-clad dancers and entwined couples. She is soon joined by Marcus and Petronius, who remarks on Lygia's beauty, saying 'Everything's there but the smile' before leaving them to join the emperor. Marcus sits close to Lygia and tries to kiss her, but she repels him. They are offered wine, but again Lygia refuses. All stand as the emperor and his empress enter and are seated. Marcus asks Lygia, 'Have you ever seen your emperor and your god this close before?' With a wry smile, Lygia answers, 'No, I have never seen Nero this close before.'

A single dancer begins to perform, and the camera now turns to Nero, who is watching the scene in a bored fashion through an emerald eyeglass. Spotting Lygia and Marcus, he is taken with the girl's beauty, encouraged by his wife Poppaea. However Petronius persuades him that she is not so beautiful ('Too narrow in the hips'). As the dance ends, a partygoer calls out for Nero to sing and, with apparent reluctance, he agrees. To his own accompaniment, he sings of the burning of Troy, to the backdrop of a flaming torch, and the audience's acclaim.

After Nero's performance there is wrestling, to the great excitement of male and female partygoers. Marcus boasts, to Lygia's obvious distaste, that the wrestler Croton has 'killed over 300 opponents!' The fight reaches a climax, and at Nero's thumbs-down signal, the victorious Croton breaks his opponent's neck. The wrestler salutes his emperor with a straight-armed salute, reminiscent to the audience of those so recently seen in Nazi and Fascist regimes. [Fig. 6]

Nero now comes down from his raised platform for a closer view of Lygia and informs her that he has made a gift of her to Marcus 'for his devotion to me and his service on the battlefield'. Lygia is horrified, and when Marcus tells her, 'Live with me – love as you were meant to love,' she angrily replies, 'What difference does it make if I love now that you own me?' Marcus sends her off with a Praetorian guard to be taken to the house of Petronius, while he obeys a summons from the empress.

of a metal shell: dress as armour. Lygia's is a deeper matte blue, covered in sparkling gems, evoking the more natural imagery of a starry sky or sun-dappled sea. This association with nature validates Lygia's moral viewpoint as one that is god-given rather than (hubristically) created by man.

Despite this clear moral agenda the cinema audience are encouraged to identify, not with the virtuous Christian maiden, but with the decadent court in their pleasurable consumption of the various spectacles. As Lygia and Acte enter the room, the camera pans round away from its focus on the two women, so that their view of the scene is also revealed to us in a single lingering shot of the whole room. We are invited to be amazed, impressed, and enticed by the mass of bright colours, the gilded decoration, the celebratory music, the exotically-dressed dancers, and the luxurious food. This latter luxury is represented on the one hand by the

6. Might is right. Wrestlers at Nero's banquet, *Quo Vadis* (1951).

excess of overflowing bowls of fruit, but on the other by the tiny roasted birds that Nero and Petronius toy with: illustrating the gourmandising luxury of the rich, not having to eat merely to satisfy hunger. The pleasures of watching are extended to giving us dedicated views of the erotic dance in progress as Lygia enters, and of the oiled and muscled bodies of the wrestlers, fighting to the death. We are even given the viewpoint of the

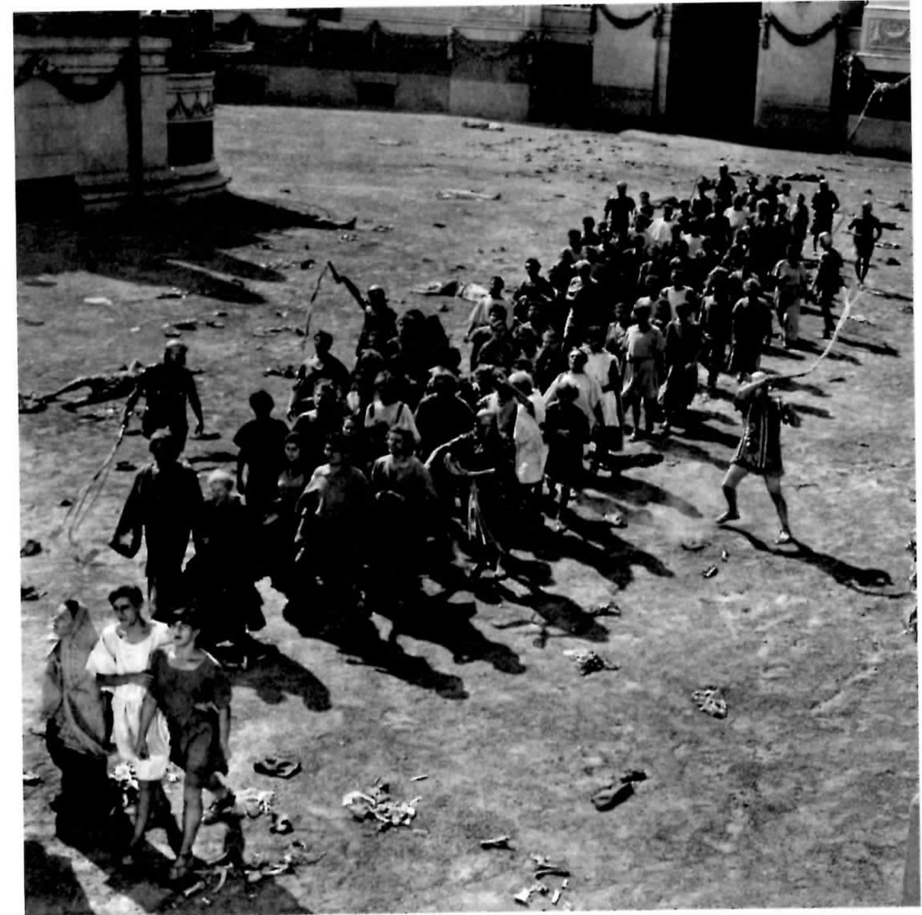
emperor and empress themselves, with green and red-toned scenes (spectacular in Technicolor) as we watch with Nero and Poppaea through their emerald and ruby eyeglasses. Thus, the power of Nero to create spectacle is tacitly identified with the power of the Hollywood studio.

Freedom and tyranny

Politics and morality are closely associated in *Quo Vadis*, with the political consequences of moral decadence drawn as tyranny. This theme is signalled in the spoken prologue that opens the film that declares, over images of massed soldiery and ragged, mistreated slaves, that in imperial Rome, 'The individual is at the mercy of the state ... Rulers of conquered nations surrender their helpless subjects to bondage', before noting the imminent victory over such practices by the 'humble cross'. The imagery, strikingly similar to newsreel images of the herding of Jews from the ghettoes during the Second World War, is repeated later in the film as the Christians are herded into the arena. [Fig. 7]

More than just a lesson from ancient history, the film presents Rome as a metaphor for more recent political 'tyrannies' like Nazism and Communism. The film's tyrant is Nero, named in the prologue as the 'anti-Christ', an epithet familiar to post-war audiences from its use in anti-Hitler propaganda. More verbal references to recent political events punctuate the script. The Holocaust is signalled with Nero saying that he will 'exterminate' the Christians, and noting that 'When I have finished with these Christians, history will not be sure that they ever existed.' Petronius warns Nero of 'the judgement of history'. In return, Nero's response to Petronius' suicide is to give the order, 'Burn his books!' The latter recalls directly the pre-war campaign by the Nazi regime to burn all books that appeared to contradict their ideology. In addition to the verbal references, there are also visual cues to the audience to identify the iconography of Roman imperial tyranny with that of more recent regimes: the wrestler's straight-armed salute mentioned above is one. These are especially prominent in the sequence of Marcus' triumph [see box: 'Marcus' triumph'].

Although television was gaining in popularity by the 1950s, newsreels screened as part of a cinema programme were the more common way for most viewers to access moving pictures of public events and figures. Before the war in particular, films of ritualised public celebrations in both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy had been commonly distributed as expressions to the rest of the world of the growing power of those regimes. Through these films, and through the official and innovative cinematic records of Nazi gatherings made by Leni Riefenstahl, a visual vocabulary of totalitarian power was established and widely disseminated. This included the use of typically Roman symbols such as the eagle and the fasces, the trope of vast massed crowds to demonstrate support, and the juxtaposition of tiny human figures against monumental architecture, implying the inevitability of history. Particularly relevant to this sequence are newsreel films showing Nazi and Fascist leaders attending march-pasts. For example, a 1938 Pathé item has Hitler on a visit to Rome, observing a vast military parade with Mussolini. The leaders stand on a balcony with their close advisers behind them, framed by monumental columns and guarded by soldiers in gleaming breastplates. Eagles are much in evidence, and some shots frame the march against a backdrop of ancient architectural remains. An insistent military drumbeat sounds throughout the clip, while marchers are shown processing diagonally across the screen. Members of the crowd give the straight-arm salute, and the two leaders salute the marchers as they pass. The familiarity of newsreel items such as this would have confirmed to the audience of *Quo Vadis* a strong visual identity between the Roman emperor and modern tyrants.



7. Christians herded by Roman guards in the arena, *Quo Vadis* (1951).

Marcus' triumph

The Forum is filled with a vast crowd awaiting the appearance of the emperor and the start of the triumphal procession. In front of the imperial palace, a chorus performs a celebratory hymn while dancers with pink and purple cloaks circle an altar. In the background is a huge banner with the imperial eagle outlined in gold. Vestal priestesses dressed in white appear, and their leader prays to the Olympian gods whose statues stand on either side of the altar space, including 'Zeus, father of the gods, and Nero his divine son!'

Meanwhile Marcus waits impatiently in his chariot. He is told that he cannot enter the Forum until the emperor appears on the balcony. But within the palace, Nero is reluctant to appear to his people, calling them 'that foul-smelling rabble' and complaining, 'This mob tortures me.' Finally, after Petronius appeals to his artistic vanity, he passes out onto the balcony to the sound of trumpets, accompanied by his empress Poppaea and her pet leopards, and other members of his inner circle. He gives the straight-armed salute to the crowd who cheer wildly. However, among them are those who dissent. The camera closes in on one woman who hisses 'Wife-killer! Mother-killer!' and pronounces that 'everyone knows he is a beast', before her husband silences her. The camera pans across the crowd to reveal the apostle Peter, who replies that, 'No man is a beast ... he is but sick ...'. But Nero hears only the cheers. 'How they love me!' he beams.

On his signal, the procession begins with flower-girls strewing the path. They are followed by massed drummers who fill both eyes and ears, with their insistent regular drumbeat, and visually dominate the screen in a regimented diagonal pattern of red, white and gold. These are followed by standard-bearers. Eventually we see Marcus, in gleaming golden breastplate, standing in a golden chariot pulled by four white horses. Behind him stands a slave, holding a gilded laurel wreath over his head and intoning the traditional formula, 'Remember thou art only a man.' But Marcus is fruitlessly scanning the crowd for a glimpse of Lygia. As he passes the imperial palace, he salutes Nero, who returns the gesture. While Marcus is facing away from the crowd, we see Lygia pulling her cloak around her head, and hurrying away.

The triumph is structurally paralleled later in the film in the sequence showing the burning of Rome – itself reminiscent of newsreels of the Blitz in London and other cities. Here again are the people of Rome in their masses, out on the street, but this time the noise is terror rather than excitement. Marcus is again at their level, but identified negatively as 'one of them – Nero's soldiers!' Lygia is in the crowd, but this time found by Marcus rather than unseen, and Nero and his court again watch the action from a raised viewing point, in this case the roof of the palace, while the emperor plays his lyre and sings of the Fall of Troy. In its parallels to the earlier celebration, this sequence reveals the dark truths that lie behind the tyrant's apparent love for his people, and, in Nero's choice of subject

matter for his song (the destruction of Troy), the mytho-historical inevitability of his demise.

Petronius and the blacklist

Like all cultural texts that achieve more than a passing impact, *Quo Vadis* is receptive to a number of possible readings. Less explicitly than some other themes, *Quo Vadis* can be viewed as a film about performance and the arts, with the ancient authors Petronius, Seneca and Lucan all named, Nero's artistic attempts highlighted, and so many of the characters 'performing' an identity that disguises their real selves, to protect themselves against the governing power. In particular, the film can be read as a critique of artistic censorship and repression, with the paranoid and sycophantic imperial court presented as a metaphor for the Hollywood film industry itself. Its poster boy in the film is that anonymous author, Petronius.

During the post-war period, hundreds of writers, actors and other film industry personnel were actually or effectively blacklisted for alleged Communist sympathies. Although some degree of contact with Communist groups had been widespread among writers and artists in more idealistic pre-war years, by the post-war period disillusion had set in for many. In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began an investigation into claims that Hollywood had been infiltrated by Communist sympathisers who were using popular movies to disseminate their political views and indoctrinate audiences. Called to testify at hearings that persisted into the 1950s, few of these acknowledged any direct connection or agreed to name or confirm the names of others said to have been involved. A refusal to answer direct questioning about Communist Party membership was considered an admission of guilt in itself, and in 1947 the studios signed a joint statement blacklisting ten writers who had done just this: the 'Hollywood Ten', as they became known, were subsequently also imprisoned for contempt. Others were damned by association, or by being named in various unsubstantiated lists. Some of the accused moved to Europe where anti-Communist feeling was not so strong, and some writers were able to continue working under pseudonyms. However, for many the consequences of the HUAC hearings were felt not only on careers, but also on personal lives: depression, marriage break-ups, and alcoholism were common.

Epic films set in the ancient world have had a peculiar part to play in this story. *Spartacus* (1960) was the first film to defy the blacklist openly by crediting one of the original ten blacklisted writers, Dalton Trumbo (for more on this, see Chapter 4). Another of the Ten, Albert Maltz, wrote the original script for *The Robe* before being blacklisted, and his name did not appear on the film's credits when it was released. A further example was *Alexander the Great* (1956), the first major film by the writer and director

Robert Rossen following his rehabilitation from blacklisting after he agreed to name other sympathisers: the film's focus on political disillusionment and personal betrayal chimes with Rossen's own story. The original script for *Quo Vadis* was written by John Huston, a prominent supporter of those accused by HUAC. Though he escaped blacklisting himself, many of his films were censored by the studios for their political aspects, and in 1951 he left Hollywood and moved to Ireland. In his autobiography, he writes of his ambitions for the film as a political allegory, and his removal from it by Louis B. Mayer, the head of studio, who wanted more focus on entertainment. Despite his replacement as a writer, it is clear that the spirit of Huston's original script remains in the film's resolute anti-totalitarianism. A more explicit reference to censorship and repression in the arts can be found in Petronius' letter to Nero, delivered after his suicide [see box: 'Farewell Petronius'].

Petronius' letter critiques the effects that occur when those in power are allowed to control the arts. In the context of the activities of HUAC and the studios, and the blacklisting of writers and performers, it notes the negative consequences on creativity of the forced conservatism and adversity to risk-taking that such activities produced. Nero's response mirrors the response of the studios, in destroying the careers of those blacklisted and even retrospectively removing their credits from films.

It is pertinent here to return to the sources for the film. As mentioned above, Petronius' letter listing Nero's crimes was attested by Tacitus, though he did not note any mention of Nero's artistic efforts. In both the historical sources and the novel, Seneca's forced suicide predates that of Petronius. However, revising these events makes it possible for the critique to be delivered to the emperor (standing in for the studios) by a writer, as the film itself does. In addition, Petronius' own historical status makes him the natural icon for such an endeavour. His authorship of the first-century novel the *Satyricon*, a bawdy and witty satire on Roman social mores is generally agreed, but has never been confirmed. Putting one's name to such a critique of the kind of behaviour led by the emperor himself would have been a dangerous act. Although in the film, the novel is not mentioned, it does make a passing appearance in the novel, when Petronius buys a copy of the manuscript for Marcus, explaining to him that he is unnamed as author in order to avoid the fate of less tactful writers. As an author who challenges the mores of the powerful, and has to keep his identity hidden, there is a clear parallel between Petronius and blacklisted Hollywood writers in the post-war period.

As well as the letter, there is an earlier critique of the power of the Hollywood studios by Petronius. In the party scene at the court, there is an out-of-character moment where he seems to offer a direct and serious criticism of Nero quite different to his usual witticisms. When the emperor talks of the need for first-hand experience of burning a city to inspire his poetry, Petronius says sharply, 'Burn a city in order to create an epic? That's carrying the principle of art for art's sake too far!' The later sequence, which this conversation prefigures, showing the burning of Rome is undoubtedly one of the most 'epic' aspects of this film, both intra- and extra-diegetically: publicity stories noted that it took three months of planning and twenty-four nights to film. The sharp-eyed will also have noted though that the motto of M-G-M, the studio that made the film, is *Ars gratia artis* – which translates as 'Art for art's sake.' It would appear that it was not just Nero who was the butt of Petronius' wit.

If this critical reading was perhaps too carefully coded to reach ordinary filmgoers in the 1950s, it is more transparent to informed modern viewers,

'Farewell Petronius'

A gentle fade reveals to the viewer another Roman party: but this time without the raucous vulgarity of Nero's feast. Refined music plays and guests (including Seneca), dressed mostly in white and muted shades, recline convivially around a shared table. There is generosity without excess, with slaves refilling drinks, but no overflowing displays of food or luxury. At the head of the table are Petronius and Eunice, reclining towards each other and forming, with the flowers and drapery in the background, a vision of calming symmetry that is largely maintained throughout the sequence. The hierarchy and relationships of voyeuristic power seen in Nero's party are absent here; rather there is a feeling of comradeship and equality. This is made explicit with Petronius' speech, in which he tells Eunice that she is no longer a slave, has been given ownership of his property, and should address him by his name, Gaius.

Revealing that he knows he has lost Nero's favour, Petronius declares that he will thwart the emperor's plans to make him suffer, noting that 'This evening is my ... signature' and explaining that 'it is not enough to live well. One must die well.' He calls in his physician who quickly opens his veins. Eunice seizes the blade and opens her own, determined to die with her lover. No blood is seen: rather it is symbolised by the red flowers placed between the two. Petronius now dictates a letter to be sent to Nero, in which he notes the emperor's responsibility for the deaths of his wife and mother, and for the burning of Rome, but declares that his greatest crimes are against the arts, citing 'your second-rate psalms – your mediocre performances'. He goes on, 'mutilate your subjects if you must, but ... do not mutilate the arts. Brutalise the people, but do not bore them, as you have bored to death your friend, the late Gaius Petronius.' As Petronius slumps lifeless against the equally lifeless Eunice, Seneca stands and delivers a brief eulogy, saying, 'Farewell Petronius. With you perishes the best of our Roman world.'

The letter is delivered to Nero, who is at first angry: 'Without permission? It's rebellion – blasphemy!' but then calls for his 'weeping vase' to mourn his 'dearest friend and truest critic'. On reading the letter, however, his countenance changes, and in a fury he screams in impotent vengeance, 'Destroy his house ... burn his books ... beat his memory into the ground!'

who have the benefit of historical hindsight, and easy access to background information that is not controlled by the studios' publicity machines. Petronius warns Nero about the 'judgement of history'. Perhaps such judgement may be made, not only on the Roman emperor, but also on the misused power of the post-war Hollywood film industry itself.

Suggested further viewing

The Robe (dir. Koster, 1953)
Adapted from the popular 1942 novel by Lloyd C. Douglas, *The Robe* relates the story of Marcellus Gallio (Richard Burton), a Roman tribune who is detailed to lead the soldiers attending Christ's crucifixion and wins Christ's robe in a game of dice. Before this, Marcellus has gained the enmity of the imperial heir Caligula by bidding successfully against him for a Greek slave, Demetrius (Victor Mature). Marcellus is sent to Jerusalem where Demetrius meets and begins to follow Christ. After the crucifixion, Marcellus dons the robe and is immediately struck with a maddening remorse. He returns to Rome, close to insanity. In an attempt to cure him, he is sent back to find and destroy the robe. In Cana he finds Demetrius, who hands him the robe. This time he feels a great peace, and converts to Christianity. He returns to Rome with Peter as a missionary, but is arrested on the orders of Caligula, now emperor. Refusing to renounce Christ, he is condemned to death and is joined in this by his childhood sweetheart Diana (Jean Simmons).

As the first film to use CinemaScope, *The Robe* was technologically innovative and seen as an important tool in the studios' plans to defend themselves against the growing popularity of television. It was followed by a sequel, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) which again starred Mature, and was filmed on the same sets just as filming for the first film finished.

Ben-Hur (dir. Wyler, 1959)
Ben-Hur was the third film to adapt the popular novel of the same name by General Lew Wallace, published in 1880. The director William Wyler had in fact worked as an assistant director on the chariot-race sequence in the very successful 1925 version. The narrative is highly equivocal, resonating with both the anti-tyranny agenda and the consequences of the Hollywood blacklist.

The film's hero is Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston), a wealthy young Jew whose path crosses that of Christ at a number of key points. The narrative opens with Ben-Hur's childhood friend Messala (Stephen Boyd) arriving in Jerusalem as a Roman tribune detailed to seek out Jewish opponents to Roman rule. The two argue when Ben-Hur refuses to name dissidents, and later when the Roman governor is accidentally injured by a falling tile, Messala has his former friend and his mother Miriam and

sister Tirzah arrested. Ben-Hur is sent as a slave to the galleys where he eventually attracts the interest of the Consul Quintus Arrius (Jack Hawkins). When the ships are attacked, Ben-Hur rescues Arrius, who takes him back to Rome, adopts him as his son and trains him as a charioteer. Returning to Jerusalem, Ben-Hur takes part in a chariot race with Messala. Ben-Hur wins and Messala is fatally injured, but reveals before he dies that Miriam and Tirzah are in a lepers' colony. Encouraged by Esther, a former slave, he takes them to Christ to be healed, but instead Ben-Hur finds Christ on the way to crucifixion. Fearing that any hope for curing their condition is about to be lost, Ben-Hur along with Miriam and Tirzah journey along to Calvary to see Christ put to death. As witnesses to the event, Miriam and Tirzah are healed by their faith, and Ben-Hur is released from his desire for vengeance.

The Fall of the Roman Empire (dir. Mann, 1964)
Unusual in the genre for claiming its inspiration from a work of historiography (by Edward Gibbon) rather than a novel, this serious and pessimistic film was the last of the post-war Roman epics. Released a year after Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra*, it was massively expensive to produce and did not achieve sufficient box-office returns to avoid the producer Samuel Bronston filing for bankruptcy. However it has since been critically acclaimed and was partly adapted for the plot of its successor, *Gladiator*, in 2000.

The plot opens on the Germanic frontiers of the Roman empire. The emperor, Marcus Aurelius (Alec Guinness) has summoned the provincial governors to announce his choice of successor. This is not to be his natural son Commodus (Christopher Plummer), but his adopted son Livius (Stephen Boyd), who is in love with the emperor's daughter Lucilla (Sophia Loren), herself promised in marriage to the Armenian king. However, the emperor is murdered before the announcement can be made public. Livius supports Commodus' accession, but Commodus' ideas about governing the empire by force and brutality are quite different to his father's, which sought to establish peace. Livius opposes Commodus and is sentenced to death along with Lucilla who has tried to assassinate her brother. Commodus challenges Livius to a gladiatorial-style combat in the Roman Forum in which he is killed by Livius who then rescues Lucilla. The film ends with the imperial throne up for auction to the highest bidder.

Cultural reception of Cleopatra: Hughes-Hallett (1990); Hamer (1993).
The Production Code and Pre-Code Hollywood films: Leff and Simmons (2001); Doherty (1999); Higham (1973).
Influence of nineteenth-century paintings: Dunant (1994): 82-93; Wyke (1997a): 120-3.
Art Deco cinema architecture: Curl (1994): 212-20; Montserrat (2000): 89.
Cinema viewing as voyeurism: (in *Cleopatra*) Wyke (1997a): 95; (more generally) Mulvey (1975) 6-18.
The 'New Woman' and merchandising: Wyke (1997a): 90-9; Stacey (1994): 177-223; Hamer (1993): 121-3; Hartigan (2002) on the uses of antiquity in advertising more generally.
Denying her a 'maternal' dimension: Hamer (1993): 120.

2. The Roman Epics of Classical Hollywood: *Quo Vadis* (1951)

Quo Vadis (1951): Wyke (1997a): 138-46; Cyrino (2005): 7-33; Scodel and Bettenworth (2009); Morey (2008): 43-52; Winkler (2001b): 55-62; Babington and Evans (2003): 177-205; Solomon (2001a): 217-21.
Roman historical epic films: Wyke (1997a); Elley (1984): 76-135; Cyrino (2005); Solomon (2001a): 47-99; Fitzgerald (2001): 23-49; Babington and Evans (2003).
Film as commercial enterprise: Maltby (2003): 113-87; Eldridge (2006): 37-42.
Showcasing the power of the studio system: Wood (1975): 184; Sobchack (1990): 24-49.
Epic as film genre: Maltby (2003): 74; Neale (2000): 85. Toga dramas: Mayer (1994).
Ancient epic and epic films: Elley (1984): 13-24; Winkler (2007a): especially 43-57; Price (2008): 117-32.
Predominance of Rome over Greece: Elley (1984): 52; Nisbet (2006): vii-x, 2-44.
Alexander and *300*: Cartledge and Greenland (2010); Cyrino (2011).
Political sub-texts in epic films: Wyke (1997a); Winkler (2001b): 50-76 and (2009a): 141-50.
Quo Vadis? as metaphor for Polish oppression: Wyke (1997a): 117.
Quo Vadis (1913) and (1924): Wyke (1997a): 118-30.
Mixed critical reception for *Quo Vadis*: Morey (2008): 47.
Primary sources for *Quo Vadis*: Sienkiewicz (1997, first published in book form, 1896); Tacitus, *Annals*; Suetonius, *Life of Nero*; Petronius, *Satyricon*.
Quo Vadis in reception: Scodel and Bettenworth (2009); Wyke (1997a): 110-46.
Religious films: Babington and Evans (1993): 177-205; Elley (1984): 115-35; Fitzgerald (2001): 25-6.
Hollywood narrative: Bordwell et al. (1985): 1-84.
Economic advantages of filming in Europe: Wyke (1997a): 145; Hall and Neale (2010): 137.
Validating cine-antiquity through research: Eldridge (2006): 127-51; Wyke (1997a): 139.
Merchandising and box-office: Hall and Neale (2010): 137-9; Wyke (1997a): 145-6.
Rossen *Alexander* (1956): Shahabudin (2010).

3. Peplum Traditions: *Hercules* (1958)

Hercules: Solomon (2001a): 119-22; Elley (1984): 21-2; Blanshard (2005): 149-63; Spina (2008).
Italian peplum films: Bondanella (2001): 158-60; Brunetta (1994); Dyer (1997):

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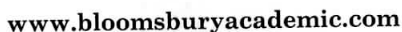

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