

## Peplum Traditions: *Hercules* (1958, US release 1959)

### Introduction

Peplum cinema, despite being one of the most prolific cinematic genres in which antiquity is represented, has never enjoyed the critical attention that it deserves. It always seems to be the poor relation to other genres. Within discussions of the ancient world on film, it has been forced to play second fiddle to big-budget Hollywood Roman epics. Within the study of Italian cinema, it is Italian neo-realist drama or the work of individual high-profile directors that dominates discussion. Even within the field of Italian genre films, it is the 'spaghetti western' that has attracted all the scholarly attention. The dismissive name says it all. The films are called peplum (pl. *pepla*) films in reference to the extremely short tunics worn by the actors. This name was coined by French critics when the first films were released. A similar nicknaming was applied to the large number of Italian westerns which were released shortly after the release of the peplum films and dubbed 'spaghetti westerns' by American reviewers. However, while the 'spaghetti western' has been renamed the 'European Western', and enjoys a reasonably active life on the art-house cinema circuit, peplum cinema is rarely re-screened at the cinema and seems destined to be stuck with its unfortunate sobriquet (the alternative 'sword and sandals' is not much better).

Conventionally peplum cinema refers to the large volume of films produced in Italy between the late 1950s and the mid-1960s that took as their subject matter a story involving a hero or adventurer from the ancient world. They have a number of distinctive elements. Muscular bodybuilders (often American) were cast as the heroic leads. Female love-interests were pretty, slim, and always in need of rescuing. The storyline traditionally involved the destruction of a brutal tyrannical regime, and there was normally a sexually voracious, vampy female who tried to seduce the hero away from his task of overthrowing tyranny and rescuing his 'true' love. Opponents tended to rely upon extra-natural resources (e.g. sorcery, mythical monsters, advanced technology) to advance their schemes, only to be thwarted by the natural strength and stout heart of the hero. Other regular features included the presence of elaborate dance sequences performed by scantily-clad women, set-piece demonstrations of heroic strength (e.g. bending bars, wrestling animals),

### 3. *Peplum Traditions: Hercules* (1958, US release 1959)

and the very noticeable dubbing of voices, especially for the UK and US releases. This last feature was a common one in Italian films of this period which almost always post-synched sound as there was rarely any budget for live sound recording. Consequently the sound for these films has a slightly unnatural air, and in the English versions the effects can be truly comic.

The production of peplum films needs to be seen in the context of Italian genre filmmaking. Unlike high-art films, genre films tended to be cheap, quickly-made productions. They normally came in what has been termed 'hit and run' cycles in which a single and often much superior work inspired numerous imitations, generally of much lesser quality. Peplum, then, belongs in a sequence that includes the opera film, the film *giallo* (erotic, crime melodramas), the dialect comedy, the horror film, the 'sexy' film (pseudo-documentary films about life in nightclubs), and ultimately the spaghetti western. These films were produced for the mass-market cinemas regularly attended by all members of the Italian film-going public, especially its poorer, rural members. The *seconda* and *terza visione* cinemas charged substantially cheaper ticket prices than the so-called 'first-rank cinemas' (*prima visione*), which tended to show high-quality, first-run films. With over 11,000 venues, Italy enjoyed one of the highest cinema attendance rates in Europe in this period, and the bulk of attendees went to mass-market cinemas. Christopher Wagstaff describes the typical viewing environment for peplum cinema:

Cinema-going in Italy was a habit; people went to the local cinema, in their own street or the next one. The film changed every day or two, and people did not bother to check what was on. They went after dinner, when they had finished eating, regardless of when the film began: this would generally be sometime before ten o'clock, which was when the last show began. They would watch the film round to the point where they came in; during the film show they would talk to friends, sometime paying only sporadic attention to the film. (Wagstaff 1995: 114)

Italian film directors have occasionally expressed nostalgia for this type of chaotic cinematic experience. Giuseppe Tornatore celebrated this lost world in *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) and it was recreated by Federico Fellini in one of the opening scenes of *Roma* (1972) where he depicts a trip to the cinema based on memories from his childhood in 1930s Rimini. In such an environment, features of peplum films such as their loose plots and preference for spectacular display rather than complex dialogue become understandable.

The origins of peplum films can be traced to the silent film classic *Cabiria* (1914) directed by Giovanni Pastrone. This lavish production, set in the time of the Second Punic War, introduced audiences to a number of features that would be replayed in peplum films. All the classic elements of peplum film are here – the classical setting, the muscles, the foreign

villainy, and the barely repressed sexuality. The figure of Maciste would go on to be one of the most popular figures in Italian genre cinema. The character was clearly modelled on Hercules. His name is derived from the Doric word *makistos* (Attic Greek = *mekistos*) which means 'tallest', 'greatest', and 'largest' and which the writer for *Cabiria*, Gabriele d'Annunzio believed was an alternative title for Hercules. In this he seems to be slightly mistaken as the word in the context of Hercules only appears as a geographical epithet referring to a town by the name of Makistos, rather than one describing Hercules' attributes (i.e. Hercules *Makistios* = Hercules 'from Makistos', not Hercules 'the greatest', cf. Strabo, *Geography* 8.3.21). The success of this Herculean character meant that he reappeared in numerous outings in the 1910s and 1920s, and became a staple of peplum films in the 1950s and 1960s.

One of the factors that distinguish peplum cinema from other examples of genre films is the tremendous success that it achieved overseas. While comedy based on Italian dialects was destined never to travel well, peplum cinema managed to achieve very respectable box-office figures in the US, UK, and France. As we shall see, the break-through film for international box-office was *Hercules* (original 1958 Italian title: *Le fatiche di Ercole*). Produced for the chaotic viewing environment of the Italian mass-market cinema, peplum's preference for spectacle rather than narrative or dialogue made them well suited to the casual environment of the American drive-in cinema, the 'B' programme of UK cinema, or later the family living room as the films were replayed on television.

The other factor that assisted the widespread distribution of these films was the routine use of co-production arrangements in their creation. In a strategy to avoid being swamped by American films, a number of European countries in the post-war period passed protectionist measures to assist the survival of their local film industries. In Italy, these took the form of requiring that Italian films be shown for a certain number of days each month, tax relief for Italian films, and the prohibition of profits from foreign films being exported to their home countries. Both France and Spain enacted similar provisions. The idea of entering co-production arrangements between European countries was first mooted by the head of the Universal studio, Salvo D'Angelo, who pointed out that there was much to be gained from branding films as the product of two countries. Not only did this make them eligible for tax relief in two jurisdictions, but it also made it easier to raise finance for film production. In time even tri-national co-productions were introduced. This form of production also proved attractive to American studios whose Italian profits were unable to leave Italy. To satisfy so many different national audiences, peplum films were not only re-dubbed into different languages, but also re-edited before distribution. Heroes were renamed. Maciste in the Italian version of the film might reappear as Samson in the French and German releases, Goliath in the Spanish version, and Hercules in the US and the UK. The

cuts made to the film could be quite severe with some films losing up to twenty-seven minutes of screen time from their original length.

The production of peplum films peaked in the early 1960s. In total over 170 films were made. At its height, approximately 10% of the Italian film industry was involved in peplum filmmaking. In the early to mid-1960s, peplum films constituted the bulk of Italian film exports, with up to three times as many peplum films being exported as the more highly-regarded Italian neo-realist and art-house films. Initially, the plotlines of peplum films were deeply indebted to classical myth and history. However, over time, more and more increasingly outlandish plots were developed and the films moved away from their classical origins. Thus, we find Hercules fighting opponents as diverse as aliens (*Hercules against the Moon Men*, 1964), vampires (*Hercules in the Haunted World*, 1962), the Incas (*Hercules against the Sons of the Sun*, 1964) and a surprisingly large number of Mongol hordes (*Hercules against the Barbarians*, 1964; *Hercules against the Mongols*, 1963; *Hercules in the Valley of Woe*, 1961).

Like all Italian genre film cycles, peplum cinema inevitably came to an end as the Italian public's appetite for these films waned and new genres such as the western arrived to take their place. The lack of an Italian film production base meant that the genre died out in the US and UK as well where audiences were getting equally tired of these 'sword and sandal' affairs. The decline in peplum films was almost as rapid as their success. There were some attempts at revival. *Hercules in New York* (1970, released in the UK under the title *Hercules goes Bananas*) was one such attempt. The film is famous now for two things: it gave Arnold Schwarzenegger his first film role (in true peplum tradition Schwarzenegger's voice, owing to his strong Austrian accent, was dubbed in by another actor), and a fight sequence involving perhaps the least convincing bear costume ever worn by an actor in a motion picture. The genre was also the subject of an affectionate parody in *Hercules Returns* (1993) in which Australian comedians replaced the soundtrack of *Hercules*, *Samson*, *Maciste* and *Ursus* (1964, *Ercole*, *Sansone*, *Maciste e Ursus gli invincibili*) with their own comic voice-overs.

### Background to case study

How does one measure a film's success? It is impossible to escape this question when discussing *Hercules* (1958). If one limits oneself to just the finances, then this film was an unquestionable triumph. The precise figures are hard to quantify. Newspapers report the final US box-office receipts at variously five, ten or eighteen million dollars. This discrepancy is largely due to the principal source of the figures being the film's often less than reliable or consistent promoter, Joseph E. Levine. Although *Hercules* did not enjoy quite the same magnitude of success in the UK owing to its limited distribution, its sequel *Hercules Unchained* (1960)

earned substantial receipts and was named the 'most successful film in 1960' in a survey conducted by *Films and Filming*. Even accounting for the lavish costs expended in the promotion of the film (Levine stated that the publicity cost over one million dollars, another slightly doubtful figure), *Hercules* clearly made a handsome profit.

Yet by other criteria the film's status is more problematic. Certainly it has never received critical acclaim. The tone was set by the first reviews of the film. The *New York Times* reviewer, Richard Nason (1959), reviewed the film under the headline 'Weak Hercules' and he described the film as 'a slow-pace and stilted affair studded with routine spectacles'. The only enjoyment he derived was from the unintentionally bad dubbing ('[Reeves'] voice has the querulous pitch of a bank clerk's) and he concluded his review by saying that 'an added market for the film might be found among students of Greek, who would have occasion to reflect on what happens to classics legends when they fall into certain hands'. Nason's review is not untypical and its sentiments were reflected in a number of the newspapers. So, for example, even though *Hercules* had only limited distribution in the UK and critics were not invited to comment on it, the *Times* nevertheless could not resist having a dig at the film. It was particularly critical of Reeves ('a remarkable physique but no noticeable acting ability') and the musical soundtrack ('The music, which veers oddly in style from Puccini to Ravel and back via Respighi, is at least consistent in its loudness'). Indeed, the only aspect of the film which seems to have won plaudits from the critics was the cinematography, in particular the picture quality produced by a European variant of Cinemascope called Dyaliscope which proved very effective at retaining sharpness when condensing widescreen shots into a 35 mm format.

The universal critical reaction against the film is a little surprising as newspaper reports prior to the film's release seem sympathetic. Reports from correspondents in Italy describe its production and are intrigued by its 'unknown star', Steve Reeves. On hearing the storyline, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* even advised its readers that if they wanted to imagine what the Greek Olympics was really like then they should go to watch Reeves as he puts on displays of archery, javelin, and discus. Yet in reviewing the final product, they struggled to find anything good to say about it. This discrepancy probably has more to say about the dependency of newspapers on editorial sent by studios for a film's pre-publicity than any change of heart on the part of reporters.

One way to explain the success of *Hercules* is to see it as just the product of a slick advertising campaign. Certainly, it was his successful marketing of this film that propelled Joseph E. Levine into the ranks of one of America's leading producers. Levine was late in coming to prominence. He was 54 when *Hercules* was released. Prior to its release, he had been a small-time promoter based in the New England area. He had some previous commercial success with his importation and promotion of *Godzilla*

(1956) and *Attila* (1954). Previous Italian films imported and distributed by Levine had been largely high-quality Italian neo-realist dramas such as *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*, 1945) and *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948). In 1958, Levine saw *Il fatiche di Ercole* and acquired the distribution rights for \$120,000. Its appeal to Levine was simple. 'It had musclemen, broads and a shipwreck and a dragon for the kids,' he is reported to have said. The following year the film was re-titled *Hercules* and launched with a campaign that combined saturation advertising with block-booking of cinemas, opening it in 624 movie houses simultaneously. This latter feature was a new one in cinema practice. In promoting his film, Levine was assisted by the recent court-mandated fragmentation of the film industry. It was the break up of the Hollywood monopoly on production and distribution that allowed distributors like Levine to thrive and prosper.

The promotional campaign for *Hercules* and its sequel *Hercules Unchained* was pervasive. It featured extensive billboards, press advertising, lavish press parties, and a giant cut-out of Reeves which toured the country. There were numerous product and commercial tie-ins associated with the film. Sometimes the link between *Hercules* and the product advertised was not entirely obvious. For example, the campaign which likened the job of a Macy's price-checker to *Hercules*' labours ('armed with only pencils and pads, they low the spectre of high price') must have raised some questions in the minds of readers. Levine's marketing was not subtle. 'SEE heroic Hercules rip down the lavish palace of lustful pleasure! SEE him crush the savage ape-men who guard the Golden Fleece. SEE Amazons lure men to revels and violent death,' promised the standard press advertisement.

In dealing with Joseph Levine, it is easy to get swept up in the rhetoric. He was a figure who always played himself larger than life. It is no accident that his name features in a larger typeface than the names of any of the actors in press advertisements for *Hercules*. He never doubted his ability to sell a film. 'You can fool all the people if the advertising is right,' he famously quipped. Yet the success of *Hercules* can't be put down entirely to marketing. Despite Levine's claims, it would be a mistake to underestimate the shrewdness of the audience. The size of Levine's campaign may have been unprecedented, but its tactics weren't. As the reviewer for the *New York Times* pointed out in his review, 'At this point in the history of film promotion it seems hardly necessary to state that the picture bears out little of the breathless excitement of its advance building' (Nason 1959: 32). The audience were wise to Levine's tricks and still they came in droves. And not only for *Hercules*, but for the numerous sequels and spin-offs that dominated the Italian peplum output for the next six years. In fact, for all his posturing, Levine did not seem to understand the phenomenon that he claimed to have created. In an interview in October 1959, Levine claimed that, despite the enormous success of *Hercules* in the

summer, the end of the popularity of peplum was close at hand and that he could see a market for only a couple more films. Levine, true to his principles, moved out of peplum quite quickly. What he did not foresee is that it would take another six years before audiences would get sick and tired of this muscle-bound hero.

The attraction for film companies of peplum cinema is easy to see – epic-style films produced at half the cost of Hollywood productions. The audience appeal needs some elucidation. *Hercules* pioneered a number of elements that together formed a distinctive cinematic vocabulary. It promoted a new version of the classical hero as well as creating a narrative in which that heroism could be displayed to best effect. This novel formulation had found its moment. To American middle-class audiences stuck in the rut of 9-to-5 jobs and the comfy domesticity of suburban existence, *Hercules* offered a world of danger, desire, and physical health. The sun always shone, and problems were simple and easily solved. Fathers could enjoy the erotic thrills provided by the Amazonian dance routine while children watched as the hero battled monsters. In the first century BC, Cicero remarked that he envied the simplicity of Hercules' life where choices were easy and right and wrong so simply defined. For the post-war audiences battling with the problems of industrialised, Cold War existence, it was easy to see Cicero's point.

### **Plot summary**

The hero Hercules (Steve Reeves) has been called to the city of Iolco by its king Pelias in order to train his son, Iphitus. Unknown to Hercules, Pelias harbours a dreadful secret. Pelias acquired his throne by organising the assassination of his brother, King Aeson. This act was performed by the hired rogue, Eurystheus. Plagued by guilt and increasingly paranoid, Pelias hopes that after Hercules' training, Iphitus will prove man enough to take the burden of the kingship from him. On his way to Iolco, Hercules rescues Princess Iole (Sylva Koscina), the daughter of King Pelias. As they return to the palace, Iole recounts her still vivid childhood memories of the night of her uncle's assassination. She tells Hercules that the death of Aeson has been blamed on his former friend Chiron, the captain of Aeson's bodyguard. Chiron is also alleged to have kidnapped King Aeson's son, Jason, and stolen the Golden Fleece, the symbol of kingship in Iolco.

On arrival in Iolco, Hercules proves extremely popular with the youth of the city who wholeheartedly embrace the new athletic and health regime he brings to the town. Hercules proves less popular with Iphitus whose arrogance and sense of self-importance make him jealous of Hercules' ability and popularity. When Iolco is attacked by the Nemean Lion, Hercules rides out to protect the city. He is followed by Iphitus who is attacked by the lion and killed. Hercules defeats the lion, wrestling it with his bare hands. Pelias is distraught by the loss of his son, and curses

Hercules (whom he holds responsible for his son's death) demanding that he capture the Cretan Bull as penance for his actions. In the meantime, Hercules has become aware of his increasing affection for Iole. Knowing that it would be impossible for him to have a relationship with her whilst he is immortal and invincible, he asks the gods to remove his immortality. They do so. It is this new vulnerable, mortal Hercules who must face the Cretan Bull.

Hercules tracks down and kills the bull, but arrives too late to save its latest victim. This turns out to be Chiron who has raised Jason (Fabrizio Mioni) to manhood in a wilderness hideaway. He entrusts Jason into Hercules' care and asks him to restore Jason to the throne of Iolco. Before he dies, Chiron explains that the Golden Fleece was lost as they fled from the palace on the night of Aeson's murder and that the fleece is now located in the far-off land of the Colchis.

Predictably, Jason receives a chilly reception when he returns with Hercules to the court of Pelias. In order to rid himself of this rival, Pelias demands that Jason recover the Golden Fleece before Pelias will accept his right to the throne. Jason vows to undertake a voyage in the just-completed boat, the Argo, to retrieve it. Hercules promises to assist him in this endeavour and they are joined by a number of other famous figures from antiquity (Orpheus, Castor and Pollux, Asclepius, and Ulysses). In order to sabotage the voyage, Pelias ensures that the assassin, Eurystheus (Arturo Dominici) is amongst the crew of the Argo.

After adventures, which include escaping an island of Amazons, beating off a tribe of ape-men, and slaying a dragon, the crew returns with the Golden Fleece to Iolco. Unfortunately, just as they reach port, the fleece is stolen by Eurystheus and spirited away to Pelias. Hercules promises to retrieve the fleece, but is knocked unconscious and imprisoned. Jason and his men make their way up to the palace of Iolco, but without the fleece, Jason is unable to claim the kingship. Pelias attempts to arrest Jason. Fighting ensues. Meanwhile in the dungeon, Iole has discovered Hercules and revives him. He breaks out of his prison and arrives just in time to turn the tide of battle. Seeing that his side has lost, Pelias commits suicide by taking poison. Jason is proclaimed king and Hercules and Iole sail off into the sunset.

### **Key scenes and themes**

#### *Staging Greece*

Film, especially populist film, has always favoured Rome over Greece. There are a number of reasons for this. The presence of convenient Roman historical narratives; the desire to pitch dissolute paganism against emergent Christianity; the metaphorical value of the Roman empire as a paradigm of modern imperialism; the cinematic opportunities provided by

the displays of wealth and colour in Rome – all of these help explain cinema's predilection for Rome. The notable exception to this trend in popular cinema is peplum film. The majority of peplum films are set in Greece. For marketing purposes, US and UK releases of these films may have preferred the Romanised versions of characters' names - for example Hercules, rather than the Greek Heracles - but that was normally their only concession to the presence of Roman antiquity. Peplum cinema provides an almost unique opportunity to examine the way in which Greek visual motifs operate within popular consciousness. The vision of Greece that peplum cinema offers refracts a notion of Hellenism that had already been established outside cinema within the genres of history painting, drama, and popular fiction.

In attempting to create a vision of Greece, filmmakers needed to develop a new cinematic vocabulary. Costuming, music, and landscape were all deployed to create a vision of Greece that stood in contrast to Rome. We gain a sense of this new aesthetic from the opening scene of *Hercules* in which a variety of elements are utilised to locate the viewer within the world of mythical Greece.

#### ***Iole's chariot accident***

The scene opens with a shot of a shepherd playing his pipes and tending his goats. He is perched high up on a promontory that falls away sharply to the sea. The landscape is dry and wild. Trees are sparse. This peaceful rural scene is violently interrupted by the arrival of an out-of-control chariot. The chariot runs perilously close to the cliff edge. Suddenly we see a tree being ripped out by its roots. The tree is lifted up by a bearded man who throws it in front of the horses to make them stop. Overcome by events, the female driver of the chariot faints into the arms of the bearded stranger. Hercules has met Iole [Fig. 8].

*Hercules* doesn't begin with lavish civic settings. There is none of the usual opulence, grandeur, or casts of thousands normally associated with the ancient world. Instead, it begins with two individuals in a rural landscape. We recognise that we are in the ancient world because of the chariot and the shepherd and his panpipes. Yet it is not quite the ancient world that we are used to seeing in Roman epic drama. This place is austere. In avoiding lavish display, the film signals that it is located in a place far removed from Rome. The only sign of civilisation is a small temple in the far background. The costumes also signify that we are in a different place. No rules of Roman morality are being observed here. The woman wears a tunic, totally unsuitable for a Roman matron. She shows a lot of thigh, but there is a classical purity about her. The hero wears no armour, but a tunic made of skins. Welcome to Greece.

This opening scene establishes a number of visual conventions that will be observed throughout the rest of the film. The first is a preference for simplicity in set design. Greek interiors tend to be comparatively sparse



8. A chance encounter in the wilds of Greece.  
Hercules and Iole, *Hercules* (1958).

spaces. There is none of the massing of decorative objects or huge swathes of rich fabric normally associated with Roman palaces. This Greece was a wild and primitive place. The Roman appropriation of the classical aesthetic forced set-designers towards the archaic. The statuary, objects, and architectural elements all take their cue from either archaic art or the Greek Bronze Age. Instead of the lushness of the Roman imperial throne room, the palace of Pelias is a dark, sinister, rough-hewn affair, suitable to the temperament of its master. Costuming also participates in this dynamic. The only time we see anything approaching such luxury occurs when the crew are washed up on the island of the Amazons. Here the exoticism and strangeness of the Amazons' island is confirmed by its lush interiors. This change in decor is a sign of just how far the crew has travelled from their Greek homeland. The simplicity of costuming also adds to the impression of the comparative poverty of Greece. In Roman epics, plain garments often identify a character as oppositional to the dominant Roman power structure. It is the dress of the rebellious Christian or the unbowed gladiator. We know that these figures stand apart from Rome because they refuse to participate in Roman aesthetics. Here again simplicity is oppositional, only this time it marks out a space for Greece, the only civilisation of the Mediterranean that can rival Rome in

terms of its legacy for western civilisation. *Hercules* also reverses the Roman practice of colourful clothes for women and white togas for men. In this film, colourful patterned clothes tend to be worn by the men of Pelias' court whilst the women wear white or subtle colours.

The potency of certain signifiers of Roman culture created a number of problems for establishing a distinct Greek look. Rome had already co-opted so much that was Greek that it left little room for a distinctive cinematic vocabulary of Greekness. For example, there is nothing inherently Roman about chariot races. Our earliest account of them occurs in Homer's *Iliad*. Yet after so many gladiatorial epics, the chariot race became synonymous with Rome in the popular mind. Greece could never have its chariot races without looking parasitic on Rome, and generally they are avoided in peplum cinema. Nevertheless, despite these disabilities, *Hercules* did succeed in creating a film with a distinctive Grecian ethos. The comparative scarcity of armour in peplum films is a good example. Peplum epics tend to eschew the use of armour. The combination of cloak and muscled cuirass, although a Greek invention, is so firmly associated with the Roman legionary that it proves impossible to reclaim or be rid of its Roman associations. For this reason, when armour does occur, it tends to be of simple design, often harking back to medieval designs rather than anything classical. In *Hercules* the soldiers wear scale-mail decorated with cross-hatches. The overextended crests on the helmets echo early Greek bronze figurines. The other obvious area of avoidance is the tendency to steer clear of using red fabric in either costume or decoration. Again the associations with Rome prove too strong even though there is a distinguished Greek tradition of wearing red: the cloaks of the Spartan warriors are the most obvious example. Instead, in peplum we see a preference for a light colour palette using light blues, whites, and gold.

In establishing a cinematic version of Hellas, *Hercules* exploited signifiers that were unquestionably Greek. Red- and black-figured pottery, Greece's most distinctive art form, provided the inspiration for the wall decoration of the palace of Pelias. While Greek letters, even if they were used on anachronistic tombstones or arranged into gibberish on Aeson's bloody note to Jason, gave viewers a sense that they were venturing into foreign territory. The sense that we are in a world before history is magnified when the *Argo* reaches its destination in Colchis. This really does turn out to be 'the place that time forgot'. The crew are attacked by a group of early hominids whilst Jason has to retrieve the Golden Fleece which is guarded by a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Greece is a strange place.

Another way in which on-screen Greece was established was through constant reference to mythological exemplars. Greece has long been viewed as a place of myth. Apart from a couple of notable examples (e.g. the *Giant of Marathon* and the *Colossus of Rhodes*), peplum has always

favoured myth as the source for its plot line. So *Hercules* co-opts the story of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece for its narrative structure. This story was one of the major mythic cycles in ancient Greece. References to the story are preserved in numerous vase-paintings, plays, and poems. The most famous version of the epic was written by the third-century BC poet Apollonius of Rhodes, who is jokily listed in the credits for the film. For the student of Greek mythology, there are many other references to enjoy: Orpheus playing the lyre to encourage the rowers; Asclepius' knowledge about the medicinal properties of poppies; the name of the assassin being the same as the name of the king who commanded Hercules to perform his labours; the young Ulysses (Greek Odysseus) being told that one day a knowledge of the bow will prove important to him.

This preference for staging Greece over Rome is partially a product of Italy's post-war desire to escape the legacy of the fascist filmmaking of the immediate past. Italian fascist ideology had made much of Rome's glorious history. From the very beginning of the Italian fascist movement links had been drawn between the name of the party and the *fasces*, the bundle of rods carried before a Roman magistrate to signify his office. Mussolini clearly projected himself as a new Augustus, leading his people to a reawakening of the Roman empire. Fascist aesthetics and ideology constantly invoked ancient Rome.

Fascist control of cinema began in September 1938 when the Italian fascist government banned the distribution of all foreign films. Into a market that had been dominated by American films, we now saw the release of Italian realist dramas, often reflecting fascist concerns about the family, religion, and the past. Films such as Alessandro Blasetti's *The Old Guard* (1934) which featured heroic fascists, or *The Iron Crown* (1941), a lavish, symbolic epic set in the medieval period about the search for a leader, exemplify this spirit. The most obvious example of the cinematic appropriation of the ancient Roman past was the film *Scipio Africanus* (1937). This was fascist Italy's most spectacular costume epic and celebrated ancient Rome's conquests in Africa during the Second Punic War. Produced during Italy's war against Abyssinia, and heavily backed by Mussolini's government, this was at the time the most expensive Italian film ever made. Drawing upon Rome's imperial past it justified Italy's expansionist present. One famous anecdote recounts that when Mussolini visited the film set during production, he received an ovation from thousands of extras dressed as Roman legionaries just as if he were a Roman emperor. The film won the Mussolini Cup for Italian cinema at the Venice Film Festival in 1937. This co-option of the classical past for such obvious political purposes meant that the Roman state, the *fasces*, the triumphal march, the torchlight parades – all these standard features of the epic film were now discredited. Ancient Rome had an ideological charge that was best avoided.

*The body of the hero*

Criticism of Steve Reeves' acting misses the point. Hercules is not produced through voice, gestures, or facial expressions. *Hercules* is as much about how a hero looks as how he acts. The use of bodybuilders for the role of the protagonist is one of the peplum's most distinctive features. Although this usage has a precedent in the rural strongman heroes of Italian peasantry, it was the spectacular success of Steve Reeves in *Hercules* (1958) that established the dominant paradigm of the bodybuilder hero for post-war pepla. Reeves offered a radically new form of the male hero, one in which the body was foregrounded far more significantly than ever before. Conventionally cinematic male beauty had resided in the face, now it resided in the chest, arms, and legs. Pepla displays more male flesh than any other genre. Normally, it is the female body that is held up for the cinema's gaze. Pepla puts the male body onto the agenda as well.

The film relishes Reeves' body. It continually engineers moments to show it off, and Reeves, the professional bodybuilder, knew how to pose himself for the camera. So, for example, as Hercules tears down the portico of the palace, the film lingers over his straining chest and arms, his lateral muscles perfectly spread in a classical bodybuilding position. It was an image that was replicated in numerous print advertisements for the film. The first time the audience gets to see an extended repertoire of Reeves' bodybuilding moves occurs in the sequence set in the training ground of Iolco [see box: 'Training the body'].

Here the film attempts to answer the question, 'What are these bodies for?'. The film explicitly links bodybuilding with sport, competition, exercise, and personal development. The first time we see Hercules, he is flanked by two companions in imitation of the victor's podium of the Olympic Games. Around him the youth of Iolco run, leap, and throw. All this activity is serving a higher goal – ethical and intellectual perfection. The old men of Iolco may complain that Hercules is causing the youth to neglect their studies, but as Hercules shows in the sequence involving the archery competition, he is offering a philosophy that harnesses body and mind together. Iphitus is used as the counter-example to show what happens when the body is developed at the expense of mind and character. His arrogance and laziness mean that he has no place in Hercules' gymnasium.

In so strongly grounding the image of Hercules in anatomy, *Hercules* is following a long established tradition. The paradigm was established for western culture by the discovery of the Farnese Hercules in the sixteenth century. This statue, over three metres high, was discovered in the Baths of Caracalla and was used by the Farnese family to decorate the front court of their palace. As a centrepiece of one of the most important collections of art by one of Rome's most prominent families, the Farnese Hercules was always destined to be in the spotlight. The statue is almost certainly a copy

**Training the body**

In a sudden jump from the darkness of Pelias' palace, we find ourselves in a brightly lit field. A line of bare-chested men throw javelins into the sky; the movement extending their upper bodies and showing off their muscles. A montage of training sequences then ensues. We see the same well-built frames running and jumping in unison. They wrestle on the ground, straining against each other to gain advantage. All this activity is too much for one young man who lies out on a stretcher. He begs the doctor to let him complete the marathon. 'They've all become fanatics since Hercules arrived. They seem to worship nothing but strength,' exclaims the doctor. Other figures join in, complaining about how the young have been swept up in an enthusiasm for exercise to the neglect of almost every other aspect of their lives.

The camera pans up to Hercules standing proud with his arms crossed on a rocky outcrop. He is stripped to the waist and wears only a short skirt. His muscles gleam in the sunshine. He is flanked by two equally impressive bodies that one of the doctor's companions informs us are Castor and Pollux. This trio gaze out over the training ground below. Suddenly a young man pole vaults up to the outcrop to join them. Hercules praises him, but also encourages him to improve his landing: 'If you want to become champion, you must work.' The young man agrees: 'I want to be like you Hercules ... My father said that you put strength ahead of everything, but I know that you want us to use our forces to serve our intelligence.'

Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Iphitus who arrogantly strides into the arena. The other men disperse. Hercules berates Iphitus for turning up so late for training. Iphitus shows little remorse. To teach him a lesson, Hercules challenges him to hit a target with an arrow from a great distance. Iphitus fails and feels humiliated in front of the crowd of onlookers. He claims that hitting such a target is impossible. Hercules then turns to the young man that he was previously conversing with and says that with the right intelligence even a boy like this could hit the target. Iphitus challenges Hercules to prove it. Just then Iole arrives in a chariot. Determined to impress her, Hercules instructs the young man in the art of archery. The young man shoots and is successful.

Outraged, Iphitus challenges Hercules to a discus competition. Iphitus throws a great distance, but Hercules throws his discus out of the arena. Alarmed and defeated, Iphitus flees from the hero.

of an original statue by the fourth-century BC sculptor, Lysippus. It was much copied in antiquity and over 80 examples survive from all parts of the Greco-Roman world. It depicts the hero at rest after completing his labours. Behind his back he hides the golden apples of the Hesperides, the collection of which was one of the last of his labours. Yet it is easy to lose the apples – indeed, this is part of the 'game' of this statue – in the great slabs of flesh that make up this Hercules. To describe the Farnese Hercules as 'hyper-muscled' is an understatement. The Farnese Hercules takes

us beyond naturalism. He bulges and ripples. We're just glad he's at rest. Imagine if he started to flex.

It is no accident that the Farnese Hercules has always been a favourite of the bodybuilding community. Eugen Sandow, the traditional father of bodybuilding, used to cover himself in chalk dust and strike a pose in imitation of the statue. The Farnese Hercules represents the ideal to which bodybuilders aspired. It is almost a cliché of bodybuilding biographies that their subjects were inspired to take up bodybuilding after seeing either a real Greek statue or a picture of one. When bodybuilders think of Greek statues, they are thinking of the Farnese Hercules.

In casting Steve Reeves (the bodybuilder par excellence) as Hercules we see the coming together of two different discourses – a popular conception of the Greek hero combining with the aesthetics of bodybuilding culture. This was not only new, it was risky. It is easy to forget this. At the start of the chapter, we asked a question about how we should measure the success of *Hercules*. Perhaps the best measure of the success of *Hercules* is that it made the showcasing of Reeves as Hercules seem so inevitable, so healthy, so natural. We couldn't be further from the truth.

First, it should be noted that films starring Hercules were not standard cinema fare. Ever since the rise of Romanticism, Hercules had been out of favour as man's favourite hero. For nineteenth- and early twentieth-century audiences, Hercules was in many ways too perfect. His triumph was too inevitable. There were no successful films of the labours because watching twelve episodes of a hero arriving only to triumph was too monotonous. Indeed, despite its Italian title translating as 'The labours of Hercules', the film didn't take the sequence of labours as its plot. Instead, it preferred to use the story of Jason and the Argonauts with a nod to the labours being given by Hercules' actions in wrestling a lion and bull. The film strips Hercules of his labours as it strips him of his invincibility. This is a hero who can bleed and die.

Secondly, we should note that Hercules lent his star-power to Reeves, and not the other way round. At the time of the release of *Hercules*, Reeves was not the aspirational figure he would later become following the film's success. Reeves may have been 'Mr Pacific Coast' (1946 & 1947), 'Mr America' (1947), 'Mr World' (1948) and 'Mr Universe' (1950), but hardly any member of the general public knew his name. Bodybuilding, despite enjoying great popularity at the turn of the century had fallen seriously out of favour in the period between the wars. There was something unnatural about spending so much time developing and contemplating these bodies that didn't do anything. It was tainted by suspicions of homoeroticism, and bodybuilding magazines had been seized as obscene publications. The sleazy nature of the sport had been seized upon by Mae West who had toured the country with her risqué reviews featuring numerous bodybuilders. The problematic status of bodybuilding was demonstrated in the musical film *Athena* (1954). This film, whose plotline

involved a sympathetically satirical look at bodybuilding and vegetarianism, was Reeves' only significant role before *Hercules*. It was a box-office disaster, and prompted Reeves to go to Europe to look for work in the film industry there. It was whilst he was searching for work overseas that Reeves was invited by Federico Teti to take the lead in *Hercules*.

*Hercules* rescued a hero who had been languishing in popularity and rehabilitated a sport in need of a makeover. Almost overnight, the sport of bodybuilding was brought into the mainstream. Advertisers created such a demand for bodybuilders that specialist agencies were created. There was suddenly a call for bodies. Over the next five years, there was practically a conveyor-belt running from the muscle beaches of California to the film studios of Rome and southern Italy. The list of actors who have played Hercules reads like a roll call of the most illustrious names in bodybuilding. Mark Forest (Mr Venice Beach, 1954), Reg Park (Mr Universe, 1951, 1958 & 1965), Peter Lupus (Mr International Health Physique, 1960), Reg Lewis (Mr Universe, 1957) and Mickey Hargitay (Mr Universe, 1955) have all lined up for the role.

#### *The lure of women*

Voyeurism in peplum comes from two directions. As we have seen above, it is a genre that is very much interested in staging the male body. However, the female body is also regularly put on display. Two different binaries operate in organising the display of female flesh. The first is that the female body is defined against the male. Whereas the male body is signified by its rugged, strong, outdoor appearance, female bodies tend to be smaller, weaker, and paler. They are bodies made for indoors. They are incapable of acts of strength. Hercules might be able to train a young boy to fire an arrow across an arena, but one is left with the strong impression that such activity would be beyond Iole, no matter how much instruction she received. The second binary occurs within the types of female bodies represented. One of the distinctive features of peplum is its strongly demarcated gender roles. Women tend to come in two types. Good, homely, virginal girls who are constantly in need of rescuing and sexy, depraved vamps who are often instigators of chaos and mayhem and who need a strong man to put them in their place. The former type of women is much more modest in appearance. Her short skirts might show off her thighs, but that is the most revealing that she becomes. In contrast, the vamp often leaves little to the imagination [see box: 'Dancing Amazons'].

'That's no job for a princess', Hercules remarks as Princess Iole attempts to fix her chariot wheel after her accident [Fig. 8]. The flip side of the concern with masculinity expressed in the *Hercules* films is an attempt to regulate and straitjacket female roles. Peplum cinema is remarkably conservative with the roles that it offers women. These roles are strongly colour-coded. Heroines wear whites and blues, whilst vamps wear red and



**Dancing Amazons**

Music floods our ears. The dance is already underway. With cymbals made from shells in their hands, the Amazons in perfect synchronicity rise, whirl, leap, and writhe. It is less a dance and more like a rhythmic gymnastics routine. Only the flowing diaphanous clothing makes us realise that we are not in the gymnasium. The scene cuts to the faces of Castor and Pollux. Goblets in hand, they are intoxicated, partly by the drugged wine, partly by the girls in front of them. We return to the Amazons. They spin around like tops. Side kicks show off their legs and buttocks. An Amazon watches on contentedly, admiring her sisters. Her smile seems to suggest some secret knowledge. We are shown scenes from the various couches surrounding the dancing display. Asclepius thinks his couch companion is too melancholy. 'We're not going to a funeral this morning,' he exclaims. A rueful smile crosses the face of the woman as she looks away. Drunk on wine, the men laugh hysterically, not noticing the sneers on the faces of their female companions. The dancing continues until the women collapse on the ground, seemingly spent.

black. Peplum cinema was never subtle, and its treatment of female roles was clumsy. Yet there is something paradoxical in this attempt to promulgate a Madonna/whore gender dichotomy. For in trying to repress female sexuality, peplum cinema has a tendency to make their evil female characters the most interesting and captivating of the women on the screen. These sexually voracious women often end up with more screen time and better dialogue. In contrast, good girls end up looking a little bland.

*Hercules* conforms to this pattern with Queen Penthesilea of the Amazons getting as prominent a role as Iole. Admittedly, Penthesilea is not as vampy as some of the 'bad girl' queens of peplum cinema. It is a law of the Amazons that all men who step foot on the island must die and she is trapped by fate and tradition into plotting against the life of the crew of the *Argo* and her great love, Jason. Wrestling with the dilemma about how to reconcile her love of Jason with her position as queen, Penthesilea struggles with a burden as great as Iole's when she finds out that her father is a murderer and a usurper. In cinema promotion the two women received equal billing. As one advertisement put it, 'The rest of the cast may be unfamiliar to you, but they fit their roles equally well, from the classic beauty of Sylva Koscina as Iole to the lethal loveliness of Gianna Maria Canale as the Queen of the Amazons.' Two sides of the same coin.

Of course, *Hercules* wasn't taking any risks in its portrayal of Amazons. Their sexual appeal goes all the way back to antiquity where they are regularly portrayed as scantily-clad and in provocative positions. For example, classical sculpture never follows the tradition of the one-breasted Amazons, preferring instead to always offer two perfectly-formed breasts for the viewer's contemplation. It is their lack of inhibitions that makes

**3. Peplum Traditions: Hercules (1958, US release 1959)**

Amazons so attractive. There has always been a fascination with fatal women.

*Hercules* manages to conflate two such dangerous groups in its 'Island of the Amazons' episode. For, while the imagery is Amazonian, the underlying story is based on the story of the Lemnian women. Jason encounters these women on the island of Lemnos in Book 1 of Apollonius' *Argonautica*. The women of Lemnos were famous in antiquity for slaughtering all the men on their island out of a jealous rage. The men's crime had been to prefer the company of the courtesans and slave girls that they had captured in war to their own wives and daughters. It is these women who were the prototypes for the Amazons in *Hercules*. Even the reference to the volcano that wiped out the men of the Amazonian island is a refraction of the history of Lemnos' own highly volcanic nature and its association with the foundry of the smith-god Hephaestus.

The western tradition of male voyeurism on Amazonian women continued into cinema. The silent film classic, *The Amazons* (1917) started the trend. The year before the release of *Hercules*, Anna Marie Nabuco had starred as Queen Conori in *Love Slaves of the Amazons* (1957) which likewise featured scenes of dancing, drugging, and seduction (promotional tag: 'This is the Lost Tribe of White Women Savages! Each a Beauty ... Each a Deadly Trap for the men they make their love slaves!'). A decade earlier, audiences had received similar fare when Amira Moustafa as Queen Zita had attempted to steal the husband of Patricia Morison in *Queen of the Amazons* (1947).

Promoters clearly knew their audience when they scheduled *Island of Lost Women* (1959) as the feature to accompany *Hercules* in US drive-in cinemas. This film was equally breathless in its promotion, promising 'Loads of Hidden Untouched Beauties' in a 'Hidden Paradise'. Yet, in case one needed reminding that these films were not all about sleaze, beneath these promises, patrons were also advised that children received a discounted ticket price and a free playground was provided for their enjoyment. As Levine realised so successfully, peplum cinema was multi-layered. It offered action and adventure for the children along with plenty of female and male bodies for the enjoyment of adults.

**Suggested further viewing**

*Hercules Unchained* (Italian title: *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, dir. Francisci, 1959)

Steve Reeves once again stars in this quickly produced sequel to *Hercules* (1958). Sylva Koscina plays Iole and Joseph Levine was heavily involved in its production. The film repeats the formula developed by director Pietro Francisci in *Hercules*. Once again an ancient narrative is coopted to provide the plot. In this case, the film is set against the story of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. While travelling to Thebes to stop the war over the

throne between the brothers Eteocles and Polynices, Hercules stops to drink at a spring. The water is drugged and Hercules loses his memory. He is taken to serve in the pleasure gardens of Omphale, the Queen of Lydia. Fortunately, Hercules is followed by the boy Ulysses who helps the hero regain his memory. As Hercules' memory returns so does his strength, and he is able to escape from the Lydians and return to Thebes. He arrives too late to prevent the war between Eteocles and Polynices. However, he does manage to rescue Iole who has managed to get caught up in events in Thebes, and bring the fighting to an end. The film was heavily promoted for its battle scenes and the licentiousness of the court of Omphale. Critics, though not enamoured of the peplum genre, were kinder to this film than its predecessor.

*Hercules and the Captive Women* (Italian title: *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*, dir. Cottafavi, 1961)

British bodybuilder Reg Park plays Hercules in this film. Made in 1961, it is a much more representative example of standard peplum fare than either *Hercules* (1958) or *Hercules Unchained* (1959). The story works together mythic elements about the shape-changer Proteus, the castration of Uranus, and the civilisation of Atlantis to create a story about a mad queen and her quest for world domination. Typical peplum themes such as the liberation of subject peoples and the seductive power of women are explored. Running through the film is a strong Cold War anxiety about nuclear proliferation. It is through uranium (created by the blood of Uranus) that Antinea, Queen of Atlantis plans to enslave the world.

*The Colossus of Rhodes* (Italian title: *Il Colosso di Rodi*, dir. Leone, 1961)

Sergio Leone is most famous for his work as a director of 'spaghetti westerns', but prior to these films he found himself caught up in the Italian film industry's love affair with the ancient world. By the time he came to direct *The Colossus of Rhodes*, Leone had established credentials in the area of cine-antiquity. Previous work included involvement in the directorial units of *Fabiola* (1949), *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959).

Unlike other examples of pepla, this film is based on historical events rather than mythological ones. As the title indicates, its subject is the Colossus of Rhodes and it tells the story of the creation and destruction of this ancient wonder, which in this film turns out to be a mechanical marvel, part statue, part weapon of war. Rory Calhoun stars as Dario, a visiting Athenian who finds himself caught up in political intrigue in Rhodes. The plot is complicated involving coup and counter-coup, but includes many of the standard peplum elements including vampy women (principally the over-sexed Diala played by Lea Massari), duplicitous foreigners (in this case the Phoenicians) and numerous scenes of choreographed combat.

- 145-83 ('White Men's Muscles'); Lagny (1992); Lucanio (1994): esp. 12-56; Frayling (2004).
- Hit and run cycles: Frayling (2004): 163-4
- Financing of peplum films and production arrangements: Wagstaff (1995) and (1998). cf. 'Nine British Films Earn £2,400,000', *The Times* (27/4/1961): 18.
- Contemporary reaction to *Hercules*' 1959 US release: Nason (1959)
- Later reaction to peplum: Bosley Crowther, 'Spears and sandals: flood of cheap costume films causes dismay', *New York Times* (12/3/1961): X1; Richard Nason, "'Hercules' starts flood of movies", *New York Times* (24/10/1959): 13; Charlton Heston, 'The epic fever', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (17/12/1961); Bosley Crowther, 'Sweet life in Italy', *New York Times* (8/5/1960): X1; Thomas Meehan, 'It's not good taste, not bad taste – it's camp', *New York Times* (21/3/1965).
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- Hercules* and the Olympics: 'New movie "Hercules" shows Greek Olympics', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (28/6/1959): J12.
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- Joseph E. Levine: N. Robertson, 'Joseph E. Levine, a towering figure in movie making is dead', *New York Times* (1/8/1987); Douglas Gomery (2000) 'Levine, Joseph E', *International Dictionary of Film and Filmmakers*.
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- Hercules* and Macy's advertisement: *New York Times* (22/7/1959): 7.
- Cicero: *De Officiis* 3.5.25.
- Staging Greece: Nisbet (2006): esp. 7-9. Importance of landscape: García (2008).
- Fascism and antiquity: Fleming (2007). Fascism in film: Landy (1986).
- Farnese Heracles: Haskell and Penny (1981); Beard and Henderson (2001): 199-202; Beard (1996).
- On demand for bodybuilders after *Hercules*: 'Nice work if you can get it', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (23/7/1961): C16.
- On the decline of *Hercules* in the twentieth century: Galinsky (1972).
- Bodybuilding: Dutton (1995): 119-29; Webster (1979): 29-35.
- Classics and bodybuilding: Wyke (1997b).
- On peplum and the crisis of masculinity: Kasson (2001); Faludi (1999).
- Women in *Hercules* advertising: 'Display advertisement', *New York Times* (22/7/1959): 7.
- Lemnian women: Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 1.610-39. Amazons: Dowden (1997); Henderson (1994); von Bothmer (1957); Blondell (2005).
- Hercules Conquers Atlantis*: Shahabudin (2009).

### 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):

# CLASSICS ON SCREEN

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