

Satirising Cine-Antiquity: *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979)

Introduction

The ancient world and its cultural artefacts tend to be associated with high culture and elitist pursuits. In contrast cinema, whether mainstream or, to a lesser extent, arthouse, has been considered part of a more popular cultural tradition. Fitting the two together is bound to be tricky. More successful examples of cine-antiquity, including all of the films discussed so far, have incorporated some element of humour to defuse this tension and avoid appearing too high-minded and didactic. Peter Ustinov's camp performances as Nero in *Quo Vadis* and Batiatus in *Spartacus* are good examples. However, there are also films that have taken a more consistently comic approach to antiquity.

There are various ways that cinema can derive comedy from the ancient world. Some films have adapted ancient comedies to the big screen. Given the context-specific nature of most comic drama, whatever the historical period, some degree of adaptation is usually necessary if the intention is anything more than presenting a record of a performance. However, the slapstick and farce found in some ancient comedies can still prove surprisingly familiar to modern audiences. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966) is an adaptation of a musical written by Stephen Sondheim, which itself adapted various elements of comedies by the Roman author Plautus including *Miles Gloriosus* ('The Swaggering Soldier'), *Pseudolus*, and *Mostellaria* ('The Little Ghost'). While some of the humour in the film does depend on the use of anachronisms, it succeeds overall in capturing the spirit of Plautine comedy with its multiple plot threads and its social satire. The action is driven by a gaggle of characters from the lower strata of Roman society: the clever slave, Pseudolus (Zero Mostel), the pimp Lycus (Phil Silvers) and the ineffectual younger son of the household, the ironically named Hero (Michael Crawford). Meanwhile the representatives of the more respectable orders of society – the two paterfamilias, the matron and the triumphant soldier – are mocked as lechers, fools, nags and braggarts.

Other films derive their comedy from juxtaposing ancient and modern worlds. In Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), the film opens with a costumed Greek chorus performing in the ruins of the Teatro Greco in Taormina, Sicily. They declaim in high style on the whims of the gods and

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the tragic fates of Achilles, Oedipus and Medea before concluding, with jarring inappropriateness, 'Take for instance the case of Lenny Weinrib. A case as Greek and timeless as fate itself.' The scene cuts to the modern day, where the New York sportswriter Lenny (Allen) and his wife Amanda (Helena Bonham-Carter) are at dinner with friends, discussing the possibility of adoption. Returning to the Greek theatre, Laius and Jocasta are introduced and muse, with the chorus, on the ungratefulness of children who murder their fathers, sleep with their mothers, and move out 'to ridiculous places – like Cincinnati'. This introduction establishes the chorus as commentators on the subsequent adoption. As the narrative continues, Lenny begins a hubristic search for the child's true parents, and ancient and modern worlds begin to overlap. Figures from the chorus along with others from Greek tragedy begin to appear in Lenny's everyday life: sometimes still dressed in costume but speaking lines from New York Jewish humour; sometimes in modern dress, like the blind beggar, Tiresias. After splitting up, Lenny and Amanda are eventually reconciled in the Greek theatre with the actors looking on. The film finishes with the chorus singing and dancing to the far-from-tragic song made famous by Louis Armstrong, 'When You're Smiling'.

In addition to these categories of humour, there is a growing group of films that derive their comedy from satirising previous examples of cine-antiquity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines satire as a poetic or prose composition in which 'prevailing vices or follies are held up to ridicule'. To succeed, satire relies on two things: first that the characteristics of its target will be sufficiently well-known that the audience will recognise them as belonging to the target; secondly that the audience is prepared to accept the target as an object fit for ridicule. By the mid-1960s, these conditions had been met for films set in the ancient world. They were both extremely well-established and widely disseminated as texts, and increasingly out of fashion with filmmakers and audiences.

There were general and more specific reasons for this decline in the representation of antiquity in film. Overall, box-office takings were down, partly due to the now rapid take-up of television. In its broad programming, this offered something for every member of the household. In response, mainstream film releases became more specifically targeted to particular age groups – adults, teenagers, children – rather than aiming at broader and more encompassing audiences. The post-war desire for escapism was also diminishing (discussed in Chapter 6). It was replaced with a contemporary wish for greater realism, actualised in the UK, for instance, in the popularity of 'kitchen-sink dramas' like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *The L-Shaped Room* (1963) – perhaps as a cultural route to validating the rapid social changes that were taking place, especially the invention of the teenager and the breaking down of class and other social boundaries.

Of the two most common cinematic styles in cine-antiquity, the peplum

films had already fallen victim to their own inherent speeded-up evolution. The constant need to surpass previous titles in their fantastic combinations and sadomasochistic elements had resulted in films that were essentially parodies of the original films in the genre. Titles included *Hercules Against the Moon Men* (1964) which imported a sci-fi element into an ancient world setting, and *Hercules, Samson, Maciste and Ursus* (1964) which combined a late antique moral fable about 'the Choice of Hercules' with strongman figures from the Bible, nineteenth-century fiction and twentieth-century cinema. (The latter was used in 1993 as the basis for a satirical film, *Hercules Returns*. More details of this film at the end of this chapter.) The pepla continued to be screened and to exert an influence on ideas about the ancient world for large audiences, but this was mostly achieved through their adaptation for television in the popular series, *Sons of Hercules*. In the meantime, features of the genre like the eclectic juxtapositions of ancient and modern, the bodybuilder Hercules and dancing girls were already a topic for satire with the release in 1962 of *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*. Transporting the three members of the popular comic act back to ancient Greece through the medium of a time machine, the film also manages to take in Roman galleys and a gladiatorial combat.

The epic films were the most prominent casualties of changing tastes. For audiences for whom Christian belief was no longer an imperative and anti-totalitarian conflicts a fading memory, the moral and political messages that provided narrative focus for the Roman epics held waning interest. In addition, the special utility that ancient world epics had had, as an alibi for screening eroticism and violence in the name of education, was no longer necessary in a society where such images were much more directly and easily available. As a consequence, ancient world epic films were no longer economically attractive for filmmakers. The gamble always inherent in epic filmmaking of betting on box-office income outstripping the enormous outlay was now seen as too risky.

This was especially the case after the financial disaster of *Cleopatra* (1963). The film began shooting in the UK in 1960, but the production was closed down after Elizabeth Taylor, who played Cleopatra, became seriously ill. After her recovery shooting recommenced, but had to be relocated to Rome for the sake of Taylor's health because of the English weather. As a consequence the budget soared, with early footage having to be reshot because some of the actors were no longer available, and the already vastly expensive sets and props being rebuilt from scratch in Rome. During filming the married Taylor started a scandalous affair with her equally married co-star Richard Burton (who played Antony), which provoked huge amounts of often hostile publicity. The director Joseph Mankiewicz's first cut of the film came in at six hours; he cut this to four hours after studio criticism, and then saw it cut again to just over three hours for theatrical release. The reduced length (and consequently sometimes inco-

herent narrative) has been blamed for the poor critical reception the film received. Nevertheless, it did gain four Academy Awards (for art direction, cinematography, costume design and visual effects) and was the highest grossing film of 1963. Despite this success at the box-office, the enormous costs incurred in making the film meant that it still made a huge loss, driving Twentieth Century Fox studios to the brink of bankruptcy.

With its over-blown budget, the over-dramatic private lives of its stars and over-long running time, not to mention the great self-regard of its pompous narrative and dialogue, *Cleopatra* was a natural target for satire, especially given the waning popular interest in ancient world epic films. Less than 18 months after its release, *Carry On Cleo* (1964) appeared in UK and US cinemas. The film was the tenth in a popular series of low-budget British comedy 'Carry On' films which featured a repertory cast indulging in puns, slapstick, and general bawdiness. The previous film in the series, *Carry On Spying* (1964), satirised the currently popular Bond films; *Carry on Cleo* followed the lead of its predecessor, taking elements of a specific film (in this case Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra*), but also aiming its satire at the whole genre. Posters for the film showed Amanda Barrie as a winking Cleo, reclining on a couch, a clear homage to Taylor's pose on posters for the original film. Credits poked fun at the epic genre's attitude to historical accuracy, stating that the narrative was 'from an original idea by William Shakespeare' and, in a classic Carry On *double entendre*, that 'certain liberties have been taken with Cleopatra'. There are many ironies about one film succeeding by virtue of another failing. As critics have pointed out, this is compounded in the case of *Carry on Cleo* where the film actually uses the discarded sets from *Cleopatra's* early UK filming. However, perhaps the real final irony is that *Carry On Cleo* probably has at least as secure a place in cultural history as the film it satirised; in the UK, perhaps more so. It is frequently named as the best of the Carry On series, and its posters have appeared on postage stamps in the UK.

More recently, satire has given a new life to some of the peplum films through their inclusion in the long-running US television series, *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* (MST3K). Screened from 1988 to 1999, this series was based on the idea of a mad scientist who imprisons a man and forces him to watch bad movies in order to see how long he can endure before going insane. To survive, the man and his robot friends provide their own commentary to the films, referred to as 'riffing'. The films were shown in their entirety with the television characters appearing in silhouette at the bottom of the screen. The outrageous camp of many peplum films suited this absurd format and titles shown included *Hercules* (1958) and *Hercules and the Captive Women* (1961) as well as the previously mentioned *Hercules Against the Moon Men*.

The best satire treads a fine line between realism and farce, and it is in that liminal arena that it makes its most effective attacks. It can be

devastating as a tool to ridicule folly, but it also runs the risk of being too crude, or too subtle, or misjudging its audience. And as the following case study will show, there is always the possibility that some consumers may miss the joke altogether.

Background to case study

Monty Python's Life of Brian describes the birth and adult life of a young man, born to a single mother in a stable in Bethlehem, acclaimed as a messiah for his wise teachings in the marketplace, scapegoated by the Roman authorities, and finally crucified. As the film's title and opening scenes make clear, its subject is not Christ. Rather it is Brian Cohen, whose loosely-virtuous mother has found herself pregnant by a Roman centurion seducer; whose impromptu 'teachings' on peace and co-operation only happen because he is trying to evade arrest as a member of a revolutionary group; and whose crucifixion is marked by the mass singing of a song which incongruously exhorts its listeners to 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'. Brian's life is a tragicomedy of errors and mistaken identity: from his birth, when the three kings who visit realise they are in the wrong stable and snatch back the gifts they've brought, to his death when his reprieve is given to another man who has jokingly claimed to be him. It makes for a satirical, absurd and occasionally surreal comic film with targets that include people's need to abdicate moral responsibility, the effects of organisation and authority on religious belief, and cinema's role in creating popular perceptions about antiquity and early Christianity.

Life of Brian was the third feature film from the Python team, and their second (after *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*) with a narrative structure, albeit one still owing plenty to the sketch format of the television show that developed the Python style. *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was a comedy sketch show produced for the public service British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and first screened between 1969 and 1974. It was written and mostly performed by a team of six: Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin. It quickly gained a cult following for its absurdist treatment of a range of often banal subjects and its innovative responses to the formal structures of television comedy. In Python-world, sketches no longer had to end with a punchline; instead, a pipe-smoking colonel could stride onto the set, waving his arms at the camera to stop filming and declaring that it had all become 'too silly'. Sketches were linked with surreal animations (by Gilliam), often featuring, for no apparent reason, classical statues, giant hands and feet descending from the heavens, or barely decent Edwardian pin-up girls. Any sense of realism was resolutely rebuffed with female roles largely taken by men dressed in pantomime dame-style drag and speaking in falsetto voices. Although only four series were produced, the cult popularity of particular sketches (such as the Dead Parrot sketch, the Lumberjack

Song, the Spanish Inquisition sketch, and the Ministry of Silly Walks sketch) extended the influence of the show's unique style as fans began to memorise and repeat them for their own audiences. In 1974, the series also began screening in the US, massively extending the audience for its very British style of comedy. Since then its considerable influence on comedians in the UK and US has been widely acknowledged, from revue shows like *Saturday Night Live* to individual stand-ups like Eddie Izzard.

However *Monty Python* did not suddenly appear on the comedy scene fully-formed and without warning, like one of Terry Gilliam's animated giant feet. The six members of the Python team had previously built a substantial body of collective experience as writers, artists, and performers on television comedy programmes, with five out of the six first performing in nationally-toured comedy revues while at university (Palin and Jones at Oxford; Cleese, Chapman, and Idle at Cambridge). Among the programmes they were involved in prior to *Monty Python* were the anarchic children's show, *Do Not Adjust Your Set* (Jones, Palin, Idle and Gilliam), the comedy sketch show, *At Last the 1948 Show* (Chapman, Cleese and Idle) and the satirical topical sketch show, *The Frost Report* (all but Gilliam). This extensive previous experience (coupled with the fact that the show was screened very late at night when only a minority audience was expected) meant that the team were allowed considerably more autonomy than was usually the case in BBC productions. They had also gained a keen awareness of what worked and what didn't in the format of the comedy sketch show. For example, the understanding that a perfectly good sketch could be ruined by an inadequate punchline prompted the cast to find alternative ways of closing a sketch that weren't so dependent on a 'killer ending'. Other elements from these earlier shows also made important contributions to the development of *Monty Python's* comedy cocktail. There is an easy transition from the political satire of *The Frost Report* to *Monty Python's* more general satirical approach to the British class system and the social conventions that it dictated. This class consciousness was explicit in sketches like 'Upper-Class Twit of the Year' and 'The Gumbies', but it also informed virtually all the writing, providing an underlying thread of continuity and making the absurdism coherent. Other more anarchic innovative comedy of the time, like Spike Milligan's TV series *Q5*, shunned convention simply for the sake of absurdity and difference, but *Monty Python's* unconventionality had a serious satirical point, however silly its content: it ridiculed the follies of a British society still paralysed by social class and conventions.

The first cinematic venture for the Pythons was *And Now For Something Completely Different* (1971), a compilation of existing sketches, designed to bring the material to a wider audience, particularly in the US. The second film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), offered new material and a (still fairly loose) narrative framework to hang it on. Combining the sketch format of the television show with the episodic

format of the Arthurian cycle, the film followed king Arthur (played by Chapman), his squire Patsy (Gilliam) and his knights (the rest of the Python team) on their quest for the Grail. Collectively and individually they encounter a variety of obstacles and characters (often also played by Pythons doubling up), including peasants who expound on the failures of various theories of government; knights who demand a shrubbery as tribute before they are allowed to pass; the Black Knight, whose extreme pugnacity leaves him demanding a fight even after all his limbs have been severed; and the rescue of a damsel in distress who is actually an extremely fey prince. Each of the sequences mocks an aspect of popular knowledge about the Middle Ages and the transmission of its history through popular culture. For example, Lancelot's rescue of Prince Herbert owes much to Errol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. The satire is most effective because of the genuine erudition that underpins it. Jones, who co-directed the film, has since become well-known as an author and television presenter of popular histories about the medieval period. Characteristic aspects of the television show are repeated in the film, including swipes at the class system; incongruous juxtapositions of historical with contemporary elements and the exotic with the banal; and the refusal to provide a conventional narrative closure. The co-direction of the film by Jones and Gilliam created some difficulties in production due to their contrasting directorial styles. However, it was a financial success, returning a gross of over £80 million for its £229,000 production budget, and has remained a favourite with audiences, being the most popular Python film in the US and voted fifth best comedy film of all time in a viewers' poll by *Total Film* magazine in 2000 among other acclamations in the UK.

There is general agreement among the Pythons that the seed of the idea for the next film came from Idle, who jokingly suggested that a good title would be *Jesus Christ: Lust for Glory*. This typical Python absurdist juxtaposition of peacemaker and gung-ho militarism drew on the title of a recent film about the abrasive Second World War US General, *Patton: Lust For Glory* (1970). Once the team had agreed that there were possibilities in the idea of a film about Christ, various ideas were proposed and discarded. The first focused on the idea of Christ as a carpenter criticising the shoddy construction of the cross. However, after further discussion and some quite serious scholarly research, it was agreed that it was difficult to find anything in Christ's life or teachings that would provide a sustainable source of humour. The focus shifted to the idea of a thirteenth disciple, who was always late and missed the important events. This plotline was favoured by John Cleese (who went on to star in *Clockwise* (1986), as a fanatically punctual headteacher forced into disastrous unpunctuality by events). Eventually the team settled on the idea of a parallel life, with its opportunities for misunderstandings and mistaken identities.

By the time serious writing development began at the end of 1976, members of the team were already working on other successful projects,

including the television series *Fawlty Towers* (Cleese) and *Ripping Yarns* (Palin and Jones), and the film *Jabberwocky* (Gilliam). However, a script draft was completed by early 1978, and production planning began. It was planned to shoot the film on location in Tunisia, taking advantage of the sets recently built for Franco Zeffirelli's television mini-series, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Days before the production crew were due to depart for Tunisia, the team learned that their financial backers, EMI Films, had pulled out. This was on the orders of their chief executive, Lord Bernard Delfont, who had shown the script to a friend on the board who was a prominent Roman Catholic, and had pronounced it to be blasphemy. (To mark this, the last spoken line of the film is: 'I said to him, "Bernie, they'll never make their money back on this one."')

As a considerable amount of money had already been spent on development and pre-production, the Pythons sued EMI Films, who eventually settled out of court. Idle and the producer John Goldstone then set off for America to try again to raise the financial backing. While there was reluctance among conventional backers to support the film, it was Monty Python's status as an icon of pop culture that eventually saved the film, with the newly-rich pop aristocracy keen to be involved. The Who's drummer Keith Moon offered to try to raise the funds, in return for which it was planned that he should play a cameo role as a 'blood-and-thunder prophet' (in the event, Moon died just before filming started). However, Idle had also mentioned the finance problems to his friend George Harrison, formerly of the Beatles, who raised the necessary £4 million (partly by mortgaging his own house) and set up the production company Hand-made Films, with Denis O'Brien. Asked why he would do something so exceptional, Harrison replied that he wanted to see the film, prompting the later description by Idle of Harrison's belief in the project as 'the most expensive cinema ticket ever'. Shooting began in September 1978 and took just 41 days, with Cleese noting that the process was 'extraordinarily efficient' and the director Jones (directing solo this time after the conflicts with Gilliam on *Holy Grail*) 'very well prepared' (Sellars 2003: 11). Harrison appears very briefly in the film as 'Mr Papadopoulos, the owner of the Mount'. Another brief cameo is by the former Goon, Spike Milligan, himself a considerable influence on Python humour, who was in Tunisia on holiday at the time and found himself roped in, not entirely happily.

The main target of the film itself is in fact Python's regular *bête noir*, the British Establishment and the status quo. They particularly aim at four of its key features: the church, the class system, the law, and education. As mentioned above, Christ was not a target, and there is care to make this clear from the start of the film. The fact that there are two separate births is shown when the wise men abandon Brian and his mother Mandy for the real Messiah. Christ also appears in person (played by Kenneth Colley) delivering the Sermon on the Mount, with Brian in the

audience. Following this there is also a scene where an extremely spritely ex-leper tries to extract money from Brian, claiming that his career as a beggar has been ruined since Christ cured him. The playing out of each of these scenes reflects the feeling of the team following their research that the humour they could extract from the life of Christ rested in the people and events that surrounded him.

A particular target however was the way that religious belief and ideas are systematised and controlled by religious laws and authorities. Christianity is not the only religion called to account here, with a general intolerance displayed in the crucifixion sequence – ‘A Samaritan? This is supposed to be a Jewish section’... ‘Pharisees separate from Sadducees’ – and Judaic laws mocked more specifically in the early stoning scene. Laws pertaining to gender mean that women are barred from the stoning, but they attend anyway in their masses, all wearing false beards. As the priest in charge, Cleese combines elements of the bureaucrat, devoted to enforcing petty rules, and the schoolmaster (which he had in fact been) sending miscreants to the back of the crowd. The crime of the man to be stoned is, ironically in view of the film’s later problems, blasphemy. The scenes following Brian’s acclamation as a messiah also illustrate the way that belief is rapidly subject to organisation, with Brian finding his former colleagues from the People’s Front of Judea (PFJ) putting together a speaking tour for him, and (comically) managing the supplicants: ‘Those possessed by devils, try and keep them under control a bit, can’t you? Incurables, you’ll just have to wait for a few minutes. Women taken in sin, line up against that wall, will you?’ Although not (ostensibly) a religious organisation, the revolutionary PFJ provide a useful (perhaps less precarious) metaphor for the Church, whilst also broadening out the target of satirical attack from just religious fanaticism to include political extremism, in this case the PFJ’s political (and historically literal) zealotry about the Roman oppression of Judea.

It is the desperate desire for an object of belief that is most clearly a target for satire in this film. Part of the research undertaken by the Pythons in the early writing stages had revealed that there had been a kind of ‘Messiah fever’ in Judea at the time, with false messiahs often being identified by a colonised population eager for a local hero. The idea is actualised in the film when Brian is mobbed by followers after his impromptu speech in the marketplace; they scrabble around for signs and symbols to worship, fixing first on a gourd, then on a sandal. Brian’s protestations that he is not the Messiah are met with the gnostic pronouncement that only the true Messiah denies his divinity, and by one follower telling him, ‘I say you are, Lord, and I should know – I’ve followed a few.’

If religion is the most immediate target, it is not the only one. As with the television series, social class informs much of the humour, with Cleese’s centurion and priest both illustrations of a bureaucratic middle

class that stands between the Roman governing class of Pontius Pilate (played by Palin) and his unfortunately named friend, Biggus Dickus (Chapman), and the working-class trade unionism of the PFJ’s committee meetings. In addition though, the film satirises the ancient world of epic films, which had had similar settings and subject matter and had formed so much of the cinema audience’s ideas about what antiquity looked and sounded like. Jones in particular spent time watching epics including *Ben-Hur* (1951) and *Barabbas* (1961). Their influence can be clearly seen in many scenes in the film, including the opening pre-credits scene of the wise men visiting the infant Brian, and the monumental stone-cut credits themselves, both of which are borrowed from *Ben-Hur*.

Like the life of its eponymous hero, the film’s reception was also marked by misunderstandings about identity, actions, and purpose. These ultimately led to accusations of blasphemy, still a common-law offence in the UK until 2008. The notion of blasphemy, or at least of offending Christian religious beliefs, had been a serious concern for earlier Roman epics, and it was still unusual to show Christ explicitly in mainstream cinema. Various tactics had been used to avoid this, for instance showing a part of the body but avoiding the face (a hand offering water in *Ben-Hur*), or staging a pastiche of an artistic representation (De Vinci’s *The Last Supper* in *Quo Vadis*). However, Christ’s actual appearance in the film was treated entirely respectfully; it was the people around him that were ridiculed, either directly (the ex-leper, Pontius Pilate) or by comparison (those who seek out prophets and those who seek to impose rules for religious belief). Jones in particular argued strongly that the film was heretical rather than blasphemous, because its challenge was aimed at the Church.

Moral crusaders like the Nationwide Festival of Light and other Christian groups strongly objected to the film, organising a campaign of pickets and leafleting outside cinemas in the UK. There were also protests outside cinemas in the US and a ban on screening by a number of local councils in the UK, and the whole of the Republic of Ireland and Norway. Most memorably two of the Monty Python troupe that made the film, John Cleese and Michael Palin, took part in a heated live television debate on the BBC’s *Friday Night, Saturday Morning* in November 1979 with Mervyn Stockwood, the Bishop of Southwark and the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, in which the two Establishment figures are widely agreed to have come off the worst. Stockwood and Muggeridge had attended a screening of the film, but missed the opening scenes which established it as a parallel life and not a life of Christ. As a result, their arguments that the film mocks Christ’s life were aimed at a target that did not exist. Attacks against the film became personal and qualitative, with Stockwood dismissing it as ‘undergraduate’ and Muggeridge calling it ‘tenth-rate’. Meanwhile Cleese and Palin were measured, thoughtful, and courteous. At the end, Bishop Stockwood signed off with the cheap sneer, ‘You will

get your thirty pieces of silver.' The debate has itself become a landmark event in popular culture in the UK, marking the moment the Establishment very publicly lost their ownership of the moral high ground. In a rapid display of intertextuality it was itself satirised eleven days later in the BBC television sketch show, *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, with Rowan Atkinson playing a bishop defending his film, *The Life of Christ*, against accusations that it lampoons Monty Python, and in particular 'Our Lord John Cleese – even the initials are the same!'

In the end, the bans may have been more beneficial than harmful to the film, creating a buzz of public interest that extended far wider than the usual, rather cultish, Python fanbase. It may also have prompted a longer life for the film, in the sense that it is now discussed not only as a cinematic comedy, but also as something that marks a key moment in the histories of cultural censorship and moral and religious change in society. It was a financial success, costing about \$4,000,000 to produce and grossing over \$20,000,000 in its first year of release in the US, making it the highest-grossing British film in the US of that year; in the UK it was the fourth highest-grossing film overall. In contrast to Muggerridge's not entirely well-informed value judgement, it has also been voted best comedy film of all time in a number of UK polls, including those by the broadcaster Channel 4 in 2006 and the broadsheet newspaper *The Observer* in 2007.

Plot summary

Following a bright star, three wise men travel to Bethlehem, where they find a mother in a stable with her baby in a manger. They fall to their knees to worship the infant, and offer up their gifts. However, it soon becomes clear that Brian Cohen is not the child they were seeking and, snatching their gifts back, they move on to the next stable from which a radiant light shines ...

Time passes and Brian (Graham Chapman) is now a young man, still living with his mother, Mandy (Terry Jones). They witness Jesus giving his Sermon on the Mount, before moving on to take part in the stoning of a blasphemer, with Mandy wearing a false beard as women are banned. Returning to their hovel, Mandy reveals to Brian that his father is not Mr Cohen, but a Roman centurion. Brian dashes out, declaring that he is not a Roman: 'I'm Kosher, Mum! I'm a Red Sea Pedestrian, and proud of it!'

We next see him in the arena where he works selling exotic snacks to the spectators. Among the few viewing the games are a small group of revolutionaries, Reg (John Cleese), Francis (Michael Palin), Stan (who wishes to be called Loretta) (Eric Idle) and Judith (Sue Jones-Davies): the People's Front of Judea. Brian asks if he can join the group, and their leader Reg gives him a task: to paint the slogan 'Romans Go Home' on the citadel. Brian is caught by a centurion who corrects his Latin and makes him paint it correctly one hundred times. With the citadel now covered in

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anti-Roman graffiti, Brian is accepted by the PFJ, and joins them on their raid to kidnap Pontius Pilate's wife. Once inside the palace though, they meet members of the Campaign for a Free Galilee who are on the same mission. A fight breaks out and Brian is arrested. However, he escapes when Pilate's guards are seized with uncontrollable laughter at the prefect's lisp.

After a surreal interlude on board an alien spaceship, Brian returns to the PFJ's headquarters, but Roman soldiers soon arrive to search for him and, attempting to hide on the balcony, he falls to the marketplace below where an assortment of prophets are preaching to small crowds. To evade the pursuing soldiers, Brian begins to deliver some vaguely spiritual platitudes, but breaks off unfinished when the soldiers pass. His audience pursue him, demanding to know what he was about to say. He escapes out of the city and into the wilderness, chased by the crowd who are now hailing him as the messiah. Leaping into a hole to hide, he disturbs a hermit who breaks his vow of silence. In the chaos that ensues, the crowd clears, revealing Judith.

The next morning, Brian wakes up next to Judith. Opening his window, he is aghast to find a huge crowd outside. He tells them they should stop looking for people to follow and work things out for themselves. His pleas fall on deaf ears. 'You're all individuals,' he shouts. They reply, in chorus, 'Yes, we're all individuals.' Meanwhile, the PFJ are busy managing the crowd inside the house, all seeking the healing services of the newly identified messiah. Brian struggles outside, and is promptly rearrested.

Sent for crucifixion, Brian has an opportunity for reprieve as part of Pilate's annual Passover speech. However when the centurion asks for Brian of Nazareth, another prisoner claims to be Brian and is released in his place. One by one, people who could have rescued him – the PFJ, the Judean People's Front, Judith, his mother – all arrive and explain why they are not going to do so. Finally, Brian has no options left. But his neighbour on the cross tells him to cheer up, and the crucifixes end the film singing, 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'.

Key themes and scenes

Satirising epic films

In their television series, the Pythons were adept at subverting both programme and comedy conventions. A special target for their ridicule was the starched and outdated politeness that the BBC itself had come to stand for, with their dinner-jacketed continuity announcer (played by Cleese) turning up in a variety of incongruous settings and situations. In *The Life of Brian*, they did a similar job of demolition-from-the-inside on the outdated cinematic clichés and monochrome morality of the Roman epic film.

As discussed in previous chapters, the underlying moral agenda of the

epics clearly associated the governing classes of imperial and pre-imperial Rome with tyrannical political regimes of the mid-twentieth century (Nazism, Fascism, Stalinism), while their opponents (slaves, Christians) were aligned with the 'free' people of the western world (primarily America). In this schema, Rome is irredeemable, needing a new order to sweep away corruption and immorality. However, *Life of Brian* includes a counter to this view in the sequence where the PFJ meet to plan their kidnap of Pilate's wife. Reg delivers a diatribe against the Romans, ending in the rhetorical flourish, 'And what have they ever given us in return?' To his annoyance, the group's members offer a list, including 'the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health' and ending in 'brought peace'. In this typically intelligent riposte to the cinematic orthodoxy, the audience is reminded that the Hollywood version of ancient history is not the only one. Rome is not always the bad guy.

Other conventional aspects of the Roman epics are also undermined. A very widely-known image from epic film is the publicity poster for *Ben Hur* (1959), which spells out the film's title in monumental carved stone letters. It is an image, while not used in the film's onscreen credits, (which instead superimposed text over a slow pan into Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*), that draws on notions of timelessness and authority to validate its narrative; a vision of antiquity literally set in stone. The titles for *The Life of Brian* borrow this notion and subvert it, opening their animated title sequence with the title spelt out in monumental carved stone letters which prove anything but timeless as one of the letters breaks off, causing the infant Brian to fall off his cloud and crash onto more stone letters below. Further stone letters spell out the names of the stars of the film, before they too collapse and plunge Brian into a chasm, past a jumble of (aptly) Fellini-esque signifiers for antiquity, including the Primaporta Augustus, the colossal sculpted head of Constantine, trumpets, banners, and more prosaic images including tenements and washing lines. The collapsing letters are a timely reminder that we are constantly rebuilding our ideas of antiquity from fragments, and that no version is the definitive one (see Chapter 7). The titles collate some of the most often used visual clichés of cine-antiquity, but no Roman epic film would be truly epic without an arena sequence. *Life of Brian* does not avoid this cliché, but it does, happily, rewrite every conventional element.

The goriness and boredom in the arena scene [see box: 'In the arena'] show up the true absurdity of the sanitised and heroic Hollywood version of the gladiatorial combat. The messy reality of arena combats, or any other violence, is generally hidden in epic film; a good example is found in the red flowers that signify Petronius and Eunice's opened veins in *Quo Vadis*. Other aspects are equally subverted, with the small and apathetic audience contrasting with the usual packed and enthusiastic crowds in the films, and the distinctly unequal, unheroic combat itself. An early shot

In the arena

The sequence opens with trumpets sounding. A caption announces the scene as 'The Colosseum, Jerusalem'. The camera pans across a gory scene in the arena, which is being cleared after the previous bout. Bloody limbs are strewn around the floor. Another caption tells us that it is the 'Children's Matinee'. A cleaner tries to remove a ring from a hand, without success – so he takes the whole arm.

Establishing shots reveal that the arena is topped with arches, each containing a statue. There is a canopied dais decorated with a golden eagle for the wealthier spectators and stepped stone seating for ordinary viewers, but there are few occupants. Today's combatants are announced as 'Frank Goliath, the Macedonian baby-crusher and Boris Mineburg'. Boris turns out to be a weedy-looking man in a loincloth, armed with a trident and net, who tries to run back out of the arena, but is prevented by the closing of the gate. His opponent is a huge gladiator clad in heavy arm and leg plates and carrying a short sword. Boris drops his weapons and runs off around the arena, pursued by Goliath.

In the meantime, Brian wanders among the spectators, selling exotic snacks including, 'Larks' tongues. Wrens' livers. Chaffinch brains. Jaguars' earlobes. Wolf-nipple chips.... Dromedary pretzels, only half a denar. Tuscany-fried bats.' He approaches a small group who are deep in earnest conversation, asking them, 'Are you the Judean People's Front?' They recoil indignantly from any association with these 'splitters', and identify themselves as the 'People's Front of Judea'. Brian asks to join and avows his hatred of the Romans.

The chase continues on the floor of the arena to a desultory chorus of boos from the sparse audience. Eventually the gladiator, panting in his heavy armour, comes to a stop and drops dead of a heart attack. Boris celebrates his victory, and Brian is told by Reg that there is a task he can do for them.

from the floor of the arena looking up to the statues in their arched recesses seems inspired by Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1872 painting, *Pollice Verso*: the same painting which inspired Enrico Guazzoni's arena in *Quo Vadis* (1912), and Ridley Scott's in *Gladiator*. This act of homage situates the Python film more thoughtfully in the visual tradition of cine-antiquity.

Brian's job as a snack-seller enables two points to be made. The absurd nature of the snacks he has for sale (described by Judith as 'rich imperialist titbits') are not a world away from some of the luxury items proposed in previous films to illustrate the decadence of Rome. In DeMille's *Cleopatra* (1934), for instance, Antony is offered tiny reed birds. Cambridge Professor of Classics Mary Beard once proposed a 'dormouse test' for judging the quality of modern recreations of Rome, arguing that one should pay attention to the length of time 'before the characters adopt an uncomfortably horizontal position in front of tables, usually festooned with grapes, and one says to another: "Can I pass you a dormouse?" The longer

you have to wait before this tasty little morsel appears on the recreated banquet, the more subtle the reconstruction is likely to be' (Beard 2005). The humour underlines a serious point. No doubt there were luxury food items in ancient Rome for the wealthy few, just as there are people who will happily pay vast sums now for coffee that has passed through the gut of an Indonesian civet, and our historical sources give undue prominence to such gastronomy. The diet of most ordinary Romans would have been quite different, but it is the extreme and the ostentatious, so obviously parodied here, that we know and associate with antiquity, and that has happened because of the wide dissemination of these notions through film.

The other point made in this scene is the parallel between cinema itself and the arena. Brian carries his exotic wares in a tray strung around his neck like a snack-seller at a baseball game in the US. However, for a UK audience in the 1970s, it would have been equally reminiscent of an old-fashioned cinema usher, selling ice creams and soft drinks. Python had already used this figure in their television series in a sketch where a cinema usher sells albatross rather than ice creams. The sketch had become a cult favourite, and was repeated in the first Python film, *And Now For Something Completely Different*, which had been successful in the US, so it is reasonable to speculate that this reading (rather than a baseball game snack-seller) was the preferred one. Cinema is also referenced in the caption, 'Children's matinee', which notes the UK cinema practice of showing children's films on a Saturday morning, often filling the theatre at a time when it would usually be empty, and inducting children into the habit of cinemagoing. Through these cues, the arena is re-drawn as the ancient cinema, a conceit also found in more serious films like *Spartacus* or *Gladiator*, which again places this satirical epic back in the tradition of the films it seeks to subvert.

In class

One of the most persistent themes pursued by the Pythons in both television and film is the absurdities of the British social class system. This is also prominent in the film, with debates about class recurring at key structural points at the beginning and end of the narrative proper. In the first post-titles sequence, among the spectators at the Sermon on the Mount we see the full spectrum of society, each behaving according to stereotype. Mr and Mrs Gregory represent the upper classes, with their black slave holding a parasol to protect them from the sun; Mr and Mrs Big Nose are the aspirational middle classes, concerned with manners, proper language and prestige; and Mr Cheeky is the confrontational working class. The same characters appear again in the crucifixion scene at the end of the film, still arguing about what they perceive to be the proper conventions by which they should be treated, even in the face of death. In many ways these groups reprise the *Frost Report's* famous 'I'm

8. *Satirising Cine-Antiquity: Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979)

upper class' sketch in which representatives of the upper, middle, and lower classes each play out the characteristics of their respective classes. The upper classes in this 1996 sketch had been represented by John Cleese.

Other characters also map modern conventions of class onto ancient characters: the aristocratic feyness of Pontius Pilate and Biggus Dickus with their natural assumptions of privilege and entitlement; the middle-class professions represented in bureaucrats like the priest at the stoning, or the liberal conscience-ridden centurion sending prisoners to crucifixion; the working-class family values and irrepressible good humour of Mr Cheeky, expecting his brother to rescue him from crucifixion, 'if he can keep off the tail for more than twenty minutes'.

Class behaviour and values were largely taught through education, so it is appropriate that one of the central scenes for this theme aims its satire here, and specifically at Latin teaching [see box: 'Romans go home'].

'Romans go home'

It is dusk. Moonlight reflects off the white marble of a giant naked statue of Pilate, as Brian stealthily approaches the walls of the palace. Foreboding music warns the audience of the jeopardy he is in as he takes out a brush and begins to paint red letters on the walls. The word 'Roman' is evident as the shot changes to reveal dark figures nearing, while Brian is too occupied with his painting to notice. The music rises to a crescendo as the centurion reaches Brian and claps him on the shoulder, asking 'What's this then?' The full graffiti is revealed as ROMANES EUNT DOMUS which Brian translates as 'Romans go home'. Instead of immediately arresting and dragging off the terrified Brian, the centurion proceeds to point out the mistakes in his Latin composition, holding him by the ear and making him conjugate verbs and decline cases. The correct Latin phrase being reached, he tells Brian to write it out a hundred times before sunrise. Brian gets busy with the paintbrush, and by sunrise the walls of the palace are completely covered with the red-painted slogan, ROMANI ITE DOMUM. 'Finished,' he tells the soldiers watching him. 'Right,' replies one of the soldiers, 'now don't do it again!'

In the UK at the time of the film's release, education was very much an active arena for class conflicts and distinctions to be played out. From the late 1960s, the UK education system had been subject to reforms that removed the earlier two-tier system of grammar and secondary modern schools, replacing them with the 'comprehensive' school. At the same time, the curriculum was modernised, removing some of the more purely academic subjects such as ancient languages and introducing more vocational subjects. Middle-class parents who had previously been happy to send their children to grammar school now scraped together the funds for private schooling. By the 1970s, secondary education had become a passionately-argued class issue with a clear divide perceived between those educated privately and those educated in state schools. One marker of that



17. 'Romans go home'. The citadel in Jerusalem, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979).

divide was the continuing study of Latin, widely derided by progressive educational reformers as a 'dead language', but valued as a symbol of difference by those supporters of private education.

All of the five British Pythons had followed typical British middle-class routes through education, progressing from single-sex grammar or private schools to university at either Oxford or Cambridge. An essential part of this type of secondary education had been the study of Latin, until 1960 a compulsory requirement for admission to Oxbridge. The graffiti sequence reflects this experience of Latin teaching by rote in British schools; the centurion threatening to cut Brian's throat is an extreme manifestation of the bullying inherent in the system, and the instruction to write it out a hundred times a common punishment for minor misdemeanours. The Pythons had been criticised in their television output for intellectual elitism, particularly for their sketches that referenced philosophy. A joke based on an error in Latin translation and the pedagogical practices of schoolmasters in fee-paying schools might attract similar accusations. However the sequence is made accessible to a wider audience by the absurdity of the situation. The final reveal where the ancient palace is seen covered in red-painted graffiti is made more effective because the

8. Satirising Cine-Antiquity: Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979)

previous scenes had taken place in twilight: the shocking truth of Brian's crime against the jealously-guarded treasure of the middle-classes is revealed by the full light of day [Fig. 17].

In search of belief

There is no escaping the fact that *The Life of Brian* satirises aspects of religion. However, much of the criticism was mistakenly predicated on the notion that the target of the film was Christ. The Pythons were all clear that there was a good reason why this was not the case – they simply couldn't find anything to be funny about in the topic. Instead, the religious satire was aimed at the kind of figures and events who might have surrounded Christ, and who certainly cluster to modern-day prophets and evangelical figures.

The Pythons claimed that much of the religious satire was driven by ideas they discovered while doing historical research for the script. For instance, the mass crucifixion sequence at the end of *Life of Brian* was perhaps the most notorious and highly criticised part of the film, because of its light-hearted approach to such a central narrative of Christianity. Christ's death by crucifixion prompted the adoption of the cross as symbol of the Christian religion. But script research showed that crucifixion was actually a very common form of punishment at the time, not something exceptional to Christ. Christianity's claim to exclusive ownership of the cross as religious symbol is one of the features of organised religion that is satirised in the film. Also targeted are religious laws that seem dislocated from belief: for example, in the stoning scene, those laws that forbid half the population from taking part in justice simply on account of biological chance.

Another object of satire is the desperate need for people to have a focus for belief, and the unsound assumptions that can grow from this need. Again, the 'messiah mania' current at the time when the film is set, and discovered during script research, was the spur for this. There is a natural tendency for populations under the control of foreign powers to wish for a nationalist hero or leader to emerge from the people, so this narrative retains a modern resonance beyond that of religious belief. In fact, it is this that forms the thread that holds the story together, making *Life of Brian* the most narratively cohesive of all the Python films.

In the scene described [see box: 'I'm not the Messiah'] we see an extended critique of the operation of faith. The scene points out that the secret to religious success is not certain dogma, but structural ambiguity. It is only when Brian breaks off mid-sentence that the crowd become interested in the mystery of what has not been said. Like the opaque pronouncements of the other prophets in the marketplace, the statements most apt to provoke faith are those which are open enough to allow believers to map on their own desires and needs. Once this process has been kick-started, anything is open to interpretation: a dropped sandal, a

'I'm not the Messiah!'

Having fallen from the balcony of Matthias' house while hiding from soldiers, Brian finds himself among the prophets in the marketplace. In order to blend in and avoid discovery, he pretends to preach to a small group of sceptical onlookers who challenge everything he says. A brisk marching sound signals the arrival of the centurion and soldiers, which gives Brian's attempts at preaching a new urgency. However, once they have passed he stops abruptly mid-sentence, sparking a sudden interest in his previously apathetic audience. They begin to follow him, insisting that he finish and, working themselves up to a pitch of hysteria when he refuses, they start claiming his every action as significant. Brian is now desperate to escape his new pursuers, and races out of the city, dropping his sandal as he goes. Some of the followers see the dropped sandal as a sign, but cannot agree on its meaning. Others claim Brian's gourd as a rival symbol and the followers start to argue amongst themselves.

In the meantime, Brian tries to hide in a hole occupied by a hermit, Simon, who accidentally breaks his eighteen-year vow of silence, alerting the followers. They hail Brian as their 'Master' and interpret everything he says as portentous, claiming 'a blessing!' when he tells them to go away, and 'a miracle!' when he points out the fruiting juniper bushes nearby. One man asks to be healed of 'a bald patch', while another claims to have been healed of blindness before falling into the hole. Only Simon holds out against the idea that Brian is the messiah, whereupon the followers declare him an 'unbeliever'. Shouting 'kill the heretic', they carry him off.

casual suggestion. And those who oppose the majority view are denounced and punished.

There is perhaps some irony that two of the key scenes concerning religion in the film are about the definitions of blasphemy (the stoning scene) and heresy (the scene described above), given that these were the very misdemeanours the Pythons were accused of committing themselves. In a telling exchange early in the film, Brian says, 'There's no pleasing some people.' And the ex-leper replies, 'That's just what Jesus said, sir.' [Fig. 18]

Suggested further viewing

Carry on Cleo (dir. Thomas, 1964)

Julius Caesar (Kenneth Williams) and the Roman legions are in Britain, in search of slaves. They find a primitive society, with the people still dressed in animal skins and living in caves, but return to Rome with a number of slaves including the ineffectual Hengist Pod (Kenneth Connor), his friend Horsa (Jim Dale), a fearless fighter, and Horsa's beloved, Gloria (Julie Stevens). An attempt on Caesar's life is thwarted by Horsa, but Hengist gets the credit and is made Caesar's bodyguard. Meanwhile Mark Antony (Sid James) is sent to Egypt, where he is seduced by Cleopatra



18. A man in drag and an ex-leper. Life in the market in Jerusalem, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979).

(Amanda Barrie) and plots with her against Caesar. Caesar travels to Egypt, but Horsa is among the slaves rowing his ship, and again thwarts an attempt at Caesar's assassination. On arrival in Egypt, a fearful Caesar persuades Hengist to adopt his identity. Cleopatra gives Hengist an aphrodisiac potion which has the effect of bolstering his manliness. He kills Cleopatra's bodyguard, and escapes back to Britain with Horsa and Gloria, where he puts Cleopatra's potion to good use with his wife Senna. We leave Mark Antony and Cleopatra in the bath, and Caesar finally assassinated by Brutus.

The film follows the well-established formula for the Carry On series of puns, *double entendres* and contemporary British cultural references. Cleopatra plays a surprisingly small role, with much of the plot concerning the differences between the sophisticated Romans and primitive Britons,

a variation on the usual Carry On anti-authority agenda. Costumes and sets were re-used from those built for the aborted British filming of the 1963 *Cleopatra*, as were motifs like Cleopatra's make-up and milk baths. The 'voice of history' narration (also borrowed from previous epic films) was done by E.V.H. Emmett, whose authoritative tones would have been familiar to British cinema viewers from the Gaumont British newsreels. Cod-Latin is liberally scattered through the script, including Antony's exclamation when he sees Cleo for the first time: 'Puer ... oh puer ... oh puer', translated by the narrator as 'Boy ... oh boy ... oh boy'; and Caesar's alleged motto, 'Nihil Expectore in Omnibus', translated as 'don't spit on public transport'. The film has been critically acclaimed as the best of the Carry On series, but so many of the jokes are UK-specific that the humour can be unintelligible to a non-UK audience.

Hercules Returns (dir. Parker, 1993)

Brad McBain (David Argue) works for the vast Kent Cinema Corporation which exploits its monopoly on film exhibition with showings of cheap mass-produced serial films like *Rocky Meets Rambo*, *Rambo Meets Bambi* and *Rambo Eats Bambi*. Brad decides to resign and open his own independent cinema, the Picture Palace. Employing a short-tempered projectionist (Sprocket, played by Bruce Spence) and a publicist (Lisa, played by Mary Coustas) who has a habit of punching anyone who insults women, Brad plans to re-open the cinema by screening the last film exhibited there before it closed: *Hercules* (1958). However, on the night of the gala re-opening they discover that the film order has been sabotaged by Sir Michael Kent, the head of the Kent Corporation. The film they receive is not *Hercules*, but a little-known title called *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus gli invincibile* (1964), and it is still in the original Italian. Brad, Lisa and Sprocket decide to re-dub the film on the spot, which is a huge success with the audience. After starting a fight with Brad, Kent is knocked out by Lisa, and the film ends in a celebratory party.

In this Australian film, the real star of the film is the comically over-dubbed version of *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus gli invincibile* with the plot outlined above merely an excuse to showcase the over-dubbed film. This technique of comic over-dubbing had previously been used to great effect in the stage show, *Double Take Meets Hercules*, performed by Des Mangan and Sally Patience, and while this couple do not appear onscreen, it is their voices that give life to the peplum characters. The over-dubbed script is full of ribald 'Ocker' humour, and brings to the surface the underlying eroticism of the pepla with the two juvenile leads renamed 'Labia' and 'Testiculi'. It also taps into the association of the peplum films (with barely-there plots and even more barely-dressed bodybuilder heroes) with kitsch and gay culture, with Hercules ordered by Zeus to 'openly reveal to the world your homosexual tendencies'. However the framing

narrative offers a more serious protest about the role of big corporations in encouraging formulaic cultural products.

Meet the Spartans (dir. Friedberg & Seltzer, 2008)

We are first introduced to the Spartan Leonidas as a baby with an implausible set of abdominal muscles and a beard. He grows up to marry Margo (Carmen Electra) and become king of Sparta. One day a messenger arrives bearing a demand from the Persian king Xerxes (Ken Davitian) for Sparta's surrender to him. Leonidas (Sean Maguire) kicks the messenger into a pit, followed by several other incongruously modern celebrities that he dislikes. The next day, he assembles his warriors to face the Persian masses. Unfortunately only thirteen have been recruited because of the strict specifications that they should be 'hunky, with deep Mediterranean tans, hot bods and well-endowed'. They travel to Thermopylae where their confrontations with the Persians include a dance-off and a series of mother insult jokes. The Spartans win, but are betrayed by Paris Hilton, a deformed Spartan who has been banned from joining the warriors. In the battle that follows, Xerxes is bonded with a convertible to become a Transformer robot, Xerxestron, but he strays too far from his power socket and crashes down on the remaining Spartans. Leonidas is crushed to death, but one blinded warrior, Dilio (Jareb Dauplaise), has returned to Sparta. A year later, he leads a new force of Spartans against the Persians, but goes the wrong way and ends up in Malibu, where he knocks down the (real-life) Hollywood actress Lindsay Lohan, leaving rehab.

Following briskly on the heels of *300* (2007), the object of the film's satire is mainly the extra-cinematic narratives around the original. Following reports that cast members for *300* had their musculature enhanced by make-up, for instance, one less-fit warrior in the later film has a 'six-pack' spray-painted onto his stomach. The well-publicised technique of filming the whole of *300* against a blue screen, with the backgrounds added in post-production, is also marked when Xerxes' army is revealed to be a blue screen. However there are also nods to older films, like this exchange between Xerxes and Leonidas which references Nero's verdict on the Christians in *Quo Vadis*: Xerxes threatens, 'When I'm through with you, you'll be written out of the history books!' to which Leonidas replies, 'That's fine, because I can't read.'

Notes

- Best of 1970 list: V. Canby, 'Critic's choice: ten best films of 1970', *New York Times* (27/12/1970): 61; cf. 'Notables name bests', *New York Times* (27/12/1970): 77; A.H. Weiler, 'Critics vote "5 Easy Pieces" best film', *New York Times* (29/12/1970): 31. For a contemporary cinematic defence, see A.O. Scott, 'Fellini's fever dream of Ancient Rome', *New York Times* (26/1/2001): E20.
- Critical reception: Highet's essay was originally printed in *Horizon* (1970) 12: 42-7 and is reprinted in Highet (1983). On intertextuality in *Fellini-Satyricon*, see especially Sullivan (2001). Simon's criticism: Simon (1970). Defence of intertextuality: See Pandiri and Baxter's letter in 'Move mailbag: "Airport", "Satyricon", Women's Lib', *New York Times* (7/6/1970): 94; cf. John Simon's response in 'Movie mailbag: from "Patton" to "Satyricon" to "Chaplin"', *New York Times* (28/6/1970): 80.
- Gallery scene: Hughes (1971): 119-21.
- Suburra Scene: Hughes (1971): 79-87; Zanelli (1970): 11-14. Non-grammatical Latin inscriptions: Zanelli (1970): 12; Hughes (1971): 80. Head of Vitellius: Sullivan (2001): 264. Use of *Roma Amor*: Zanelli (1970): 4.
- Filming of hermaphrodite scene: Hughes (1971): 44-66. Influence of Lourdes: Hughes (1971): 45; Zanelli (1970): 80. Post-Christian world: Zanelli (1970): 13.
- Cledonomanicy: Halliday (1903): 47-53. Sporus: Suetonius, *Nero* 27-9. Mirth ritual: Apuleius, *Golden Ass* 2.31-311. Mythological executions: Coleman (1990).

8. Satirising Cine-Antiquity: *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979)

- Monty Python's Life of Brian*: Cyrino (2005): 176-93; Cleese, Gilliam, Palin, Idle, Jones and the Estate of Graham Chapman (2005): 349-87; Elley (1984): 147; Solomon (2001a): 301-3; Sellers (2003): 1-24; Hewison (1981): 59-93, especially good on the blasphemy and censorship issues; Johnson (2008): a journal on the making of the film.
- The ancient world in comic films: Solomon (2001a): 283-305; Cull (2001): 162-90; Malamud (2001b): 191-208.
- Satire: Guilhamet (1987); Carpenter (2000).
- Decline of cine-antiquity: Wyke (1997a): 183-8; Winkler (1995); Solomon (2001a): 15.
- Cleopatra* (1963) and *Carry on Cleo*: Wyke (1997a): 100-9; Cyrino (2005): 121-58; Elley (1984): 93-5; Cull (2001): 162-90.
- Mystery Science Theatre 3000*: Beaulieu et al. (1996).
- Monty Python*: Cleese et al. (2005); Perry (2006); McCall (1991); Hewison (1981).
- Monty Python and the Holy Grail*: Cleese et al. (2005): 307-48; Elley (1984): 147; Hewison (1981): 38-9.

9. The Disney Version: *Hercules* (1997)

- Disney and the Disney corporation: Maltin (1987): 29-82; Byrne and McQuillan (1999); Bell et al. (1995); Watts (2002); Sammond (2005). Financial statements: Information about the size and composition of the Disney corporation is provided by Disney Investor relations. Key documents include the 2010 Disney Fact Book and the 2010 Annual Report.
- Disney and family therapy: Towbin et al. (2003).
- René Clair: Finch (1995): 85.
- Production history of *Hercules*: Thomas (1997): 164-99.
- On the age suitability for the film: J. Benzel, 'Taking the children: you're a celebrity hero now, Herc, ya big lug', *New York Times* (29/6/1997): 22.

CLASSICS ON SCREEN

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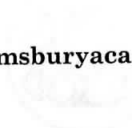
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