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Introduction

Few media can rival cinema for its ability to make the cultures of Greece and Rome accessible to the general audience. Film takes a world that is separated by space, time, and language and makes it comprehensible, entertaining, and intriguing. Its appeal transcends barriers of class, education, and ethnicity. Film stirs our emotions and fills our senses. Its impact is subtle, but effective. Its fictions become our realities. Rome may never have had regular orgies, saluted its emperors with raised arms, or condemned gladiators to die with a downward point of the thumb, yet thanks to cinema all of these have become absolute mainstays of popular conceptions about Roman culture. As one of the most potent forces for the transmission of knowledge about the ancient world, film demands our attention. As the playground where we enjoy the freedom to reassemble the fragments of the classical world as we see fit, it presents us with extraordinary intellectual opportunities. Importantly, it is a playground open to all, where access is not limited by disciplinary boundaries, educational experience, or conservative traditions. Cinema enables people to express a view about the classical world who might otherwise be prevented from doing so. Studying the cinematic output that depicts Greece and Rome (for which we have adopted the term 'cine-antiquity') provides an important vehicle for discussing the values, history, and cultural politics of the classical past. It demands that we think about what are the key elements that make the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean so distinctive and worthy of study.

At the same time, such study also makes us think about the nature of film and its place in cultural history. From the very beginning of cinema, filmmakers have routinely turned to the ancient world to provide them with inspiration for storylines, visual spectacles, and powerful metaphors. In doing so, cinema continues a long-standing practice of adaptation and appropriation of classical material. Rome's adoption of Greek culture started a trend that since the Renaissance has been one of the hallmarks of Western culture. The classical past has become the stuff of fantasy. It has many guises. It can be a lost golden age, a place where the arts reach their highest refinement. Alternatively, it has been represented as a world of pagan debauchery, one that for all its wealth and power, we are lucky to have escaped. All too often the stories that we project onto the past tell us more about ourselves than the ancient world. The past has proved a very useful vehicle for conveying lessons about the present.

Visual and dramatic media have always been particularly attracted to antiquity. Both classical texts and objects exercised the minds of Renaissance artists. Painters and sculptors found inspiration in the Roman poet Ovid's retelling of Greek and Roman myth, or the architectural writings of Vitruvius, or Pliny's catalogue of ancient artworks. The rediscovery of so many pieces of ancient statuary in Rome acted as a catalyst for artists as they sought to imitate and (in their dreams) surpass the skill of the ancients. Roman copies of original Greek sculptures such as the Apollo Belvedere, the Medici Venus, or the Farnese Heracles became the highest examples of male and female beauty. By placing classical art at the centre of the western canon, these artists ensured that all subsequent generations had to wrestle with the classical legacy in order to establish their own aesthetic visions. From the seventeenth century onwards France demanded that its painters grapple with themes from the classical past (so-called 'history painting') before they could command the respect of their peers. Through such works artists could attain a reputation for greatness. Huge canvases depicting the great battles and events from Greco-Roman antiquity dominated the elite imagination. Their allegorical meanings educated numerous audiences about the nature of virtue and rulership. Historically significant moments and individuals became examples for imitation. Kings and Emperors learnt about how to be great rulers by reading about and seeing images of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar.

The taste for the neo-classical spread throughout Europe. Archaeology fuelled this hunger. Eighteenth-century excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum sponsored fashionable revolutions in interior design and the decorative arts. It became possible to travel through the grand houses of Europe and never leave a 'Pompeian-style' drawing room. This passion continued well into the nineteenth century where the classical world proved inspirational for artists such as Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

Drama proved equally enthralled by the potential that the antique offered. One of the earliest forms of drama was the Renaissance masque and these often took the form of elaborate stagings of Greek myths. Authors such as Seneca proved popular with Renaissance audiences. Indeed, some plays such as *Hercules Furens* ('The Maddened Hercules') proved so popular that for a short period of time, it was rare to find a play without a mad character raving around in imitation of the Greek hero. Others found inspiration not so much in the plays of antiquity, but in the stories recounted in Greek and Roman history. So, for example, the biographer Plutarch proved inspirational to numerous playwrights; the most famous being Shakespeare who used Plutarch as the basis for most of his 'Roman' plays, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. Greek drama could inspire a similarly dedicated following. During the nineteenth century, for example, special trains were put on from

London so that audiences could attend the Cambridge Greek play. This was aimed at an elite audience that knew (or liked to pretend it knew) classical Greek. However, it was not just high art that was attracted to antiquity. Popular nineteenth-century circus acts and burlesques often invoked the ancient world. Thus, a trip to the circus could involve such acts as *The Flying Mercury*, *Alexander the Great and Thalestris the Amazon*, the Ringling Brothers' *Cleopatra*, and the *Last Days of Pompeii*. However, the most elaborate of these classically-themed shows was *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome*. Staged in Olympia in London in 1888, this show boasted a cast of two thousand performers, one hundred massive golden chariots, wild beasts, and combined 'gladiatorial contests of the famed Coliseum and Circus Maximus with the Olympic Games of ancient Greece'. As if that weren't enough, the poster for the spectacle promised 'grand, bewitching dances' and 'gorgeous scenes of imperial orgies'.

It is no accident then that cinema, which combines elements of both the visual and the dramatic, should find itself drawn towards antiquity. Indeed, film has benefited from personnel drawn from both these traditions. Artists who trained in history painting in France ended up as some of the earliest set-designers in Europe and America. Both actors and directors who began their professional careers working with classical drama have made their transition to life behind or in front of the camera.

Cinema has benefited from coming at the end of such a long tradition of re-imaginings of the classical world. It has the advantage of not only being able to draw upon classical sources directly, but also the richness of the appropriation of the classical world by other post-antique art-forms. And cinema has shown itself only too happy to take advantage of this plethora of material. It is just as likely to turn to the French history-painter Gérôme's nineteenth-century depictions of the gladiatorial arena or Shakespeare's story of Julius Caesar as it is to read an archaeological report or the Roman biographer Suetonius.

Additionally, films involving the classical past represent the start of a new tradition. While cinema may look to the past, it also sets out a bold, original, and distinctive vision. A number of features make the study of cinematic version of antiquity particularly exciting. Cinema asks new questions about antiquity and offers new solutions to old problems. It has also proved the inspiration for other genres. The impact of cinematic versions of antiquity can be traced in spin-offs in TV programming and advertising as well as on-line and console gaming.

The representation of the classical world in cinema is important because no genre can match film in terms of breadth and depth of audience impact. It is both the most dominant and the most distinctive popular entertainment of the twentieth century. Moreover, it has the capacity to offer a vision that transcends national boundaries. *Gladiator* (2000) proved equally popular in places and cultures as diverse as Australia,

Germany, Japan, Korea, and the Czech Republic. Few art forms can command this degree of popularity.

Mainstream cinema is able to devote financial capital and technological resources to the recreation of antiquity that dwarfs the amount spent on similar academic endeavours. Even art-house films such as *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969) can command budgets of \$3 million dollars. Directors are able (if they wish) to marshal teams of experts on everything from the fabrics worn by the women of Alexander's court to the strategy of his cavalry. Of course, such advice is always tempered by budgetary and narrative imperatives, but it is not hard to find its traces, if you know where to look.

The dynamic between the world of film and that of the academic study of antiquity is a complex one. Academics often like to imagine a large gap between the world of the ivory tower and the silver screen. Yet the gap is perhaps not as large as they would think. Cinema regularly brings into bold relief underlying assumptions about the operation of the ancient world shared by high and low culture. Set designers may constantly look to Pompeii for inspiration, but then so do the numerous academic studies that have elevated this provincial town into a model for domestic and civic arrangements throughout the Roman Empire. Pompeii dominates the academic and cinematic imagination for the same reason. It offers to fill gaps that no other source can.

Although it should be noted that cinema is far less tolerant of gaps than academic studies. Only a few directors are prepared to celebrate the fragmentary nature of the survival of elements from antiquity. Most prefer to plaster over the cracks in the pursuit of a seamless realism. One of the distinctive features of historical films set in the ancient world rather than the modern one is that the sources and evidence for the ancient world are far less complete than for other periods. There are significant absences in our knowledge. Films set in World War II or Revolutionary France (to take two popular cinematic historical periods) do not have to cope with large gaps (sometimes decades) when we know little or nothing about the activities of the principal characters, nor do they need to deal with often profound ignorance or contested theories about costuming, interior design, or props.

Watching films tackle these difficulties is revealing. For example, take the minor problem of depicting the ancient campaign tent. Owing to the nature of the construction of these shelters, none survive from antiquity, nor are they well documented in our ancient visual record. At best, we are presented with a few stylised exterior views. Yet, owing to the martial nature of so many films, they are important and necessary locations for preparatory scenes before large battle sequences. They provide a convenient location for explanatory dialogue and explanations of strategy. Cinematic imperatives pull in one direction whilst the limitations of our evidence pull in the other. Significantly, in such contests, the needs of cinema always win.



1. The image of Roman power. Interior of tent, *Herod the Great* (1958).

In such situations, films employ a variety of techniques to fill the gaps. They rely heavily on already well-established motifs so that the audience can recognise where they are. They import elements from other parallel traditions that seem appropriate to the situation. They ensure that such moments are, at the very least, thematically consistent with the rest of the film. Indeed, often so much effort is expended in filling in the gaps that the scene becomes over-determined, pregnant with all the potentiality of the film.

Compare the two tents depicted in *Herod the Great* (Italian title: *Erode il Grande*, 1958, US release 1960) and *The 300 Spartans* (1962). Both offer standard responses to the problem of filling the interior of the campaign tent. In *Herod the Great* [Fig. 1], we see the emperor Octavian/Augustus (Massimo Girotti) seated on the right. The basic structure of the tent interior is modelled upon eastern prototypes, however they have been given a classicising feel through the use of a key meander, a decorative motif most commonly found in Greek pottery and one synonymous with the classical world. Further classicising is done through the large number of props. Stools, jugs, and tables are all borrowed from Pompeian examples. In the corner rests a Roman standard. The placement is inappropriate (do you pick it up as you head out the door like an umbrella?), but few symbols are so identifiably Roman. Its only rival is the eagle and we see one of these adorning the frame displaying a campaign

map. This last element is curious. It is not a classical feature, but is one borrowed from modern warfare. Its origins lie in the 'war rooms' of twentieth-century campaigns. Through the repeated use of such maps in popular war films, audiences learnt to expect such elements as a feature of any campaign headquarters, even one set thousands of years in the past. Here preconception rather than archaeology populates the scene. The map is an object which can, in films, act as an easily-recognised signifier of antiquity: its fabrication from animal skins (as in this example), 'antique' fonts and primitive conceptualisation of the world outside, all cue us to our location. In each case, such elements help tell a story. Through the efficient deployment of staging and props (what is technically known as *mise-en-scène*), the audience of *Herod the Great* is presented with a visual shorthand of Rome's wealth (the exotic fruit and metallic drinking vessels), its power (the standard), its bureaucratic efficiency (scrolls), and its military strength (strategic map).

Contrast this with the depiction of the Persian king Xerxes' tent in *The 300 Spartans* [Fig. 2]. Again we are venturing into the realm of fantasy. The Greek historian Herodotus tells us that Persian tents were lavish in the extreme (*Histories* 9.80-2), but his description is light on interior details. He describes the plenitude of couches and cups and filmmakers have followed his cue, producing an opulent setting for the travelling



2. A sign of oriental excess. Life at Xerxes' court, *The 300 Spartans* (1962).

Persian court. Its size speaks volumes about Persian extravagance. Few cinematic tents can rival the tent of Xerxes. Rich carpets decorate the floor. There is space for a full troupe of dancing girls. In a film where Spartan austerity is pitted against Persian decadence, we need do more than look inside Xerxes' tent to see the character of the invader.

These are not isolated examples. It is possible to write a history of the depiction of campaign tents which would tell us much about the themes that flow through Greek and Roman films. Such a history would include the contrasting tents of *Spartacus* (1960), where Spartacus' egalitarian spirit and underdog status is expressed through the rustic simplicity of his accommodation in contrast to the splendour and magnificence of his Roman opponents. Place would certainly be found for Marcus Aurelius' headquarters in *Gladiator* (2000) which offer a particularly unique vision. The film abandons the simple, clean neo-classical aesthetic of many depictions in favour of a rich amalgam of textures, colours, and materials. The interior is almost baroque in its appearance. The headquarters is crammed with objects in a random assemblage of lamps, busts, diadems, armour and fabrics drawn from a variety of classical periods. It is the inventory of the British Museum rearranged as The Old Curiosity Shop. The audience can see the wealth and decadence of the late Roman Empire in every piece of overblown drapery. The dim lighting tells us that we are not witnessing the founding of a glorious future, but rather the last gasp of a world past its 'use-by' date.

We have dwelt on the image of the campaign tent because it provides a useful example of how consideration of even minor elements in a film can be rewarding. Students of the representation of antiquity in film need to pay attention to even the smallest details as sometimes these can be the most telling. The trick to studying film is knowing what questions to ask. In the following section, we present some of the issues that are worth bearing in mind when looking at cinematic Greece and Rome.

How to watch films: some preliminary considerations

The most important thing to remember when watching a film is that you are observing a carefully crafted product. Some films make this easier to remember than others. Many of the films in this book use a version of cinematic realism to portray their stories. The shots are composed to mimic the way we normally view the world, directorial interventions are minimised and hidden behind narrative imperatives (e.g. scenes change because the story demands that they do so), and there is no attempt to break the frame and remind the audience that they are watching a film. If stage drama often pretended that the audience was placed behind a glass 'fourth wall', then cinema tends to place the viewer in the position of an intangible ghost, transported from scene to scene, only able to view rather influence the action that surrounds you. These films encourage you

to suspend your disbelief and imagine that you have been transported back to the age of Nero or the world of Greek mythology. Some prefer to make this act of transportation more self-conscious. DeMille's *Cleopatra* (1934) opens on an image of two immense blocks of stone. These slowly part to reveal a chained and semi-naked slave girl, holding smoking braziers of incense, and flanked by phallic columns and bestial statuary. The viewer is quite literally granted entry into the secret, forbidden, and exotic world of the Egyptian queen.

Other films deliberately remind you that what you are watching is a constructed artifice. Their directors show their hand and never let you forget that you are a witness to a very personal vision. Through editing, special effects, deliberate anachronism, and character addresses to the audience, they play up the artificiality of the cinematic experience. They show you their workings and invite you to appreciate their skill. Sometimes there is an opportunity to achieve both the aims of immediacy of audience presence and celebrate the artistry of the director through the use of cinematic effects. For example, in *Spartacus* (1960), the experience of gladiatorial combat is intensified through the decision to film the sequence through the slats of the arena's wooden fence. On the one hand, the viewer is placed in exactly the same position as the other slaves as they watch the fight. It is just like being there, standing next to them. On the other hand, we might understand the slaves to be figured as a cinema audience: witnessing only a controlled (and in this case 'widescreen') portion of the scene that is playing out on the other side of the fence. The double shift in perspective prompts the viewer to think about the 'naturalness' of shot composition. The obscuring of parts of the scene and the tight framing of the shot reminds you of the role of directing and editing. It demands that we think about how scenes are manufactured and makes us alert to the cinematographer's art.

The job of the critical viewer is to preserve a double-vision when watching all of these different types of films. We need both to appreciate the effects that films create and also the techniques by which those effects were created. Amongst other details, we must consider the study of camera angles, shot composition, the use of background music, lighting, props, and acting techniques. Hopefully this leads to a doubling of pleasure rather than a halving of it. Knowing that every sound of the arena in *Gladiator* (the roar of the beasts, the clang of metal against metal, the squelch of a body being sliced in two) was the result of meticulous sound engineering and design intended to create a complete soundscape can only increase one's appreciation of the total effect. Students should acquaint themselves with the various types of shots used in films and the basic techniques of cinematography. The list of suggested further reading at the end of this chapter will help you. In the following discussion, we raise some issues to consider when looking at the cinematic portrayal of antiquity.

One should never forget the industrial context when considering cin-

ema. In some ways, this is true for all art forms. One gets a diminished sense of a painting if one examines it without considering the role of patrons, dealers, commissions, contemporary fashions, or the technical limitations of materials. Similarly, a full appreciation of the novel only comes with an understanding of the roles of editor, publisher, typesetter, and bookseller as well as the methods of its dissemination and circulation. The same idea applies only more so to cinema because more than any other art form, cinema is a collaborative activity. Naturally, one is drawn to the figure of the director, and some directors feature more than others in the story of a film's production. Yet even the most hands-on director cannot achieve their vision without the help, skills, and artistry of others. When one considers the roles of actors or screenwriters, this influence is often easy to see or trace. Less obvious, but equally crucial, are the huge number of ancillary figures (e.g. cinematographers, editors, sound technicians) that feature in a film's production. A director like Wolfgang Petersen may express a desire that his Helen in *Troy* (2004) is an 'unknown beauty'. Yet it is only through the skilled knowledge and negotiations of teams of casting agents and actors' agents that this desire can be translated into reality. Diane Kruger who played Helen in *Troy* was not magicked out of thin air, she was the product of a process. One should be wary of the fallacy of 'auteurism', the tendency to attribute every aspect of a film back to the director.

In addition, the film industry is a business. Films are expensive to produce and they need to make a profit. While some genres of film are more sensitive to cost/profit issues than others (and we will discuss these when looking at individual cases), it is worth bearing in mind that even the most avant-garde director will often have producers and funding bodies keeping an eye on expenditure and box-office receipts. Financial concerns impinge not only on production, but also on the way that film is sold. The director may intend one message, but advertising executives may play up another. The advertising for *Hercules* (1958) promised more action and spectacle than the film actually delivered. Similarly, the campaign for *Fellini-Satyricon* sold the sexuality of the film in a manner totally disproportionate to the film's contents. While most of the films that we examine don't suffer from the issue of sponsored product placement, almost all did enjoy a number of product tie-ins. Through examination of such products we can see refracted some of the key themes of the film. Roman bread may have been gritty, unprocessed, hard – and it certainly was not baked in a 'spotless, gleaming kitchen' – but Sunbeam Bread's advertisement on the back of *Quo Vadis* (1951) is less concerned about the type of bread that Marcus Vinicius would actually have offered his children than reinforcing Robert Taylor's portrayal as a trustworthy, wholesome father-figure [Fig. 3]. This advertisement ran in over 500 newspapers and helped maintain the public presence of the film. In relation to film advertising, students should keep an eye out for film



3. 'Bread beyond compare'. Quality Bakers' 'Quo Vadis' advertisement.

gimmicks. Cecil B. DeMille's reported decision to use solid gold cups in the barge scene in *Cleopatra* (1934) even though the film was shot in monochrome is not a story about directorial megalomania, but rather the story of a clever marketing ploy. What better way to sell a film about a world of excess than create a world of excess in its own right?

Throughout our discussion of films, we have favoured a very historicist form of analysis as we believe that once one begins to locate film productions within a particular set of industrial, collaborative and social conditions, one can appreciate the forces that operate upon a film to shape its form, style, and content. One needs to catalogue and understand the various environmental factors that surrounded a film's production. As we shall see, a tremendous variety of factors can impact upon production. These can include everything from personal relations between actors to the tax regimes that govern the distribution of a film's profits.

One needs to appreciate the power and role of technology in film production. Over the period of time studied in this book, there are a number of revolutionary changes in film stock, projection techniques, and the ability to create special effects. Filmmakers responded accordingly. Indeed, new technology can even act as the spur to cinematic visions. Certain narratives play up the strengths of certain technologies, and one can understand the temptation to produce stories that take advantage of new advances in technology. Technicolour, Cinemascope, and CGI – to choose just three examples – have each in turn played important roles in making Rome come alive. Each technique promised a bigger, richer experience, and it is understandable that filmmakers deployed them in depicting the biggest, richest empire that the world has ever known – imperial Rome.

Appreciating film as an industrialised art form makes one see the ridiculousness of getting too hung up on 'historical errors' in a film. Filmmakers are not historians, and it is foolish to treat them as such or hold them accountable to the same standards. Films may claim in their publicity that they present events 'as they really happened', but such claims should be seen merely as another gambit in getting the audience to suspend their disbelief rather than a statement of fact. The fields of wheat that feature so prominently in *Gladiator* (2000) anachronistically show wrong strains of wheat and retroject monocropping practices onto ancient agriculture. However the Romans imagined the Elysian Fields, it wasn't like the ones shown in *Gladiator*. But so what? Spotting the error doesn't take us that far. It is a much more profitable use of time and effort to focus on the techniques by which a sense of 'authenticity' is instilled in the audience. Errors may be useful in bringing into relief certain narrative or directorial decisions, but a catalogue of 'mistakes' on its own misses the point of why one might watch films.

We should never forget that film production is only one half of the equation when assessing a film. The other half involves examining a film's reception and for this we need to consider the cinema audience. Audiences vary according to time and place. Watching a film today on DVD, or even on a cinema screen, is often a very different experience from watching a film at the time of its production. In order to appreciate the impact of a film, we need to appreciate the mindset of the audience that watched it. To do this, we need to consider what other films preceded their viewing of the film and so framed their expectations. Reviews and advertising colour an audience's experience. We need to look at the contemporary politics and social issues of the day. This all forms part of the baggage that the audience took with them when they went to the cinema. We ought to pay attention to the exhibition context as well. Watching a film in a drive-in is not the same as watching it in a darkened silent cinema. The disrupted, casual viewing environment of the drive-in favours an appreciation of the episodic and the spectacular far more than sustained narratives or complex character development. In addition, we should be wary of assuming

a too monolithic notion of a film's audience. Different audience members take away different messages from a film and appreciate different aspects. One member of an audience may see Steve Reeves in *Hercules* (1958) as a symbol of healthy masculinity, another may see him as a figure of erotic camp. Some men may take the manipulative empress Cleopatra in DeMille's *Cleopatra* as a symbol of the dangerous liberated woman, whilst some women in the audience may see her as a symbol of power, an aspirational figure and the embodiment of style.

Finally, in focussing on the external factors of production context and audience expectation, we should not lose sight of the film itself. Films are not just a mechanistic product of certain environmental elements. These factors certainly shape the nature of the film and its reception, but we should not forget the individuality and innovativeness of the cinematic product. Each film has its own narrative pace, its own grammar and syntax. We need to look at a film and follow how it develops. Certain key moments are crucial. It always rewards to pay attention to the very opening sequence of a film to see how it establishes itself. This provides the entry point for all subsequent experience. The authoritative voice-over that begins so many Roman films may be a cliché, but it determines how audiences reacted to the central characters and themes of the film. Watching a film is a journey. Your point of departure, your method of transport, your guide, and your travelling companions all make a difference to the overall experience.

The format of this book

This book is arranged into ten chapters. Each chapter takes a particular film as a case study, and the films are arranged in chronological order by release date. Our films have been chosen not because of popularity (although almost all films were a success at the box-office), but because each film allows us to examine a different style of cinematic presentation or theme. In offering this selection of films we have aimed for breadth in genre, production technique, and narrative form.

Each chapter begins with a general introduction to the issues that such films raise for the representation of the ancient world. Particular focus is placed on issues of genre and style. A brief genealogy of the film is offered and the production considerations of each style of filmmaking are discussed.

After this broad contextualisation, there is a more detailed discussion of the individual case study. Each case study is introduced with essential background information, including the ancient narratives and figures which inspire the films, the social, political and production contexts of the film's manufacture, and their critical reception and afterlife. Issues addressed may include intra-cinematic notions like narrative, *mise-en-scène*, casting and performance, and extra-cinematic aspects like exhibition and promotion.

This background discussion is followed by textual analysis. This section begins with a plot summary and then examines a number of important themes in each film. Each theme includes examples of key scenes, set out in the boxes in the text, in which the themes are developed or foregrounded.

Following this textual analysis, further examples of films in this style are briefly introduced. We have tried where possible to cite films that are readily available. There are notes at the end of the book that allow the reader to follow up more detailed points raised in the text of the book.

This book is designed for a variety of audiences. It emerges from a course first run by the authors in the Classics department at the University of Reading. As such, one of its principal aims has been to provide an accessible introduction to the undergraduate reader in the Humanities who would like to explore how the ancient world has been portrayed in cinema. However, we hope that a number of other users will find this book valuable. As a work of reception studies, we offer it as an example of what a study that places cinematic genre at the centre of its investigation might look like. In this, we hope to stimulate discussion about how reception studies might be taught and conducted. We hope that those working in the field of popular culture will also find this book useful. Classical source-material has been glossed so that those unfamiliar with the ancient world might better appreciate the extent to which cinema engages with issues fundamental to Greco-Roman civilisation. One should be wary about being too flippant about cinematic depictions of the past. Often a serious point lies beneath the cheap togas and plaster columns of popular films.

Further reading

On cinema and the ancient world generally:

Jon Solomon (2001), *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (New Haven: Yale University Press) is a comprehensive catalogue of films with Greek, Roman, and Biblical settings.

Martin M. Winkler (ed.) (2001), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) offers various articles demonstrating different approaches to films both set in, and inspired by, antiquity.

Maria Wyke (1997), *Projecting the Past* (London: Routledge) illustrates the historicist approach taken in this book, with a focus on films with Roman narratives.

Monica Cyrino (2005), *Big Screen Rome* (Malden: Blackwell) offers structured analyses of nine key re-presentations of ancient Rome in cinema.

On reading films critically:

James Monaco (2009), *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media and Beyond*,

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4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press) is a thorough, accessible and comprehensively illustrated guide to almost everything you need to think about when analysing films.

David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson (1985), *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press) focuses on the key features of Hollywood narrative cinema in its most influential period.

Graeme Turner (2006), *Film as Social Practice*, 4th edn (London: Routledge) shows how the social context of our viewing and understanding of films provides useful tools for analysis.

Acknowledgements

Numerous debts were accumulated in the writing of this book. Financial and resource support was provided by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Board, the University of Sydney, and the Centre for Classical and Near Eastern Studies of Australia (CCANESA). The authors would especially like to thank the following for their help and friendship, without which this book would not have been possible: Maria Wyke (former colleague, former teacher, and constant inspiration), Garry Peirce, Dunstan Lowe, Nick Lowe, Joanna Paul, Peter Brennan, Olivia Kelley, Mark Ledbury, Murray Dahm, Tom Hillard, and Lea Beness. We are forever grateful for the extraordinary generosity and kindness of Bill Zewadski, a real visionary in understanding the importance of popular culture to the Classics. Finally our thanks go to our students at Reading and Sydney whose questions, ideas, and enthusiasm reminded us why books like this are worth writing.

Alastair J.L. Blanshard
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The University of Reading

Establishing the Conventions: *Cleopatra* (1934)

Introduction

Every cinematic version of antiquity owes something to the films that came before it. In this book, case studies are arranged chronologically to reflect that cultural genealogy. Our approach is to consider the choices that are made when films tell their stories about the ancient world within the social, historical, and cultural contexts of their production. One of the most important contexts will be the evolving discourse of representation created by the films themselves and their audiences. This chapter will focus on the early stages of this process: the introduction of cinematic conventions that make viewers feel that what they see on screen is a 'true' animation of antiquity – the ancient world brought to life.

The process to be described is a highly interactive one, as all evolutionary processes are. A number of factors are working together here, most notably cinema production processes and the preferences and social circumstances of cinema audiences. As commercially-orientated cultural products, the ways in which films depict and interpret narratives and characters are driven by the perceived tastes of their viewers at the time of release: what has proved popular in the past, what novelty can be introduced, and what audiences will not tolerate. This is not a new idea. It is now a commonplace to note that every kind of cultural text is in some way influenced by and reiterates earlier texts. However, the commercial nature of cinema tends to press down the accelerator pedal on this process. Films are expensive to make, and must recoup their costs. As a consequence, they tend towards conservatism in their representations, always seeking to re-use signs and imagery that audiences have responded favourably to. These features need to be highly familiar for the viewer, swiftly recognisable wherever possible. As a result, conventions can become established very quickly, through only a small number of texts. However, films also need to include something new, to pique the viewer's interest and distinguish them from their predecessors and competitors. This balance between conservatism and novelty drives the evolution of representational conventions in cinema.

To understand how these conventions might operate on the viewer's perceptions of the ancient world means considering the viewpoint of the contemporary audience at the time of a film's release. Of course, this

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- Fantasies about Rome: Orgies, see Blanshard (2010): 48-64; Roman salute, see Winkler (2009a).
- Classical art, the Renaissance, and the artistic tradition: Bober and Rubinstein (1986); Haskell and Penny (1981); Coltman (2009). History painting: Rosenblum (1967) contains an excellent introduction to neo-classical history painting.
- Julius Caesar as model commander: Wintjes (2006). For Caesar more generally, see Wyke (2006a).
- Pompeii and its impact: Hales and Paul (2011).
- Leighton and Alma-Tadema: Dunant (1994) and Becker et al. (1997): esp. essays by Prettejohn, Morris, and Whiteley.
- Impact of *Hercules Furens*: Riley (2008).
- Shakespeare and the Roman world: Martindale and Taylor (2004): esp. essays by Roe and Braden; Miles (1996); Chernaik (2011).
- Cambridge Greek Play: Easterling (1999). Rome in popular entertainments: Malamud (2001a).
- Gérôme in the cinema: Gotlieb (2010) cf. Beeny (2010).

1. Establishing the Conventions: *Cleopatra* (1934)

- Cleopatra* in film: Wyke (1997a): 73-109; Cyrino (2005): 121-58; Hughes-Hallett (1990): 329-64; Hamer (1993): 117-32; Winkler (2009b): 264-81; Llewellyn-Jones (2002); Solomon (2001a): 62-78.
- Early film industry: Monaco (2009): 256-70. Cultural status of early cinema: Perkins (1972): 9-27.
- Ancient world in silent cinema: Solomon (2001a): 3-10.
- Pyrodramas: Mayer (1994): 90. Strongmen and *tableaux vivants*: Dutton (1995): 119-22.
- Early Italian historical epics: Bondanella (2009): 8-11; Brunetta (2009): 34-8. *Cabiria* (1941): Winkler (2009a): 94-121; Landy (2000): 33-9.
- Socio-historical influences on Italian cine-antiquity: Wyke (2006b): 171-9 (for a case study on Julius Caesar's role in this).
- Synecdoche and historiophoty: White (1988): 1193-99.
- Cine-antiquity as education: Wyke (1997a): 92, 94 (on the Paramount Study Guide for *Cleopatra*).
- Moral coding through accents: Wood (1975): 184; Joshel et al. (2001): 8-9. Cf. Levene (2007): 389-94.
- Music in cine-antiquity: Solomon (2001b): 319-37, esp. 324-6.
- Primary sources for *Cleopatra*: The most influential accounts are those found in Plutarch, *Life of Antony*. Cf. Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 48-9 and Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar* 35, 52 and *Life of Augustus* 17 as well as the accounts of Dio Cassius and Appian.