

Hercules, Politics, and Movies

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The legend of Hercules finds its apogee in the Italian mythological movies of the Sixties, commonly called peplum or the sword and sandal genre. The Hercules series were low-budget productions made to exploit the international success of the Italian movie *Hercules (Le fatiche di ercole, 1958)*, for in this film Italian producers thought they had found the “magic recipe” to make low-cost movies with a high commercial success that could successfully compete with Hollywood epics. Generally the peplum revolved around a Herculean-type character played by an American bodybuilder performing feats of bravery in order to restore a legitimate sovereign against an evil dictator. The strongman character who starred in the Hercules movies was not only the semi-god Hercules, with more than twenty films between 1957 and 1965, but also Maciste, a Herculean character who had his cinematic origins in the 1914 silent film *Cabiria* and was resuscitated for this series.

My purpose here is to investigate the connections between the Hercules myth, the peplum genre, and contemporary Italy. The strong, moral righteous hero of the Italian peplum flourished during a crucial turning point in Italy's history, during the so-called “Italian economic miracle,” which catapulted Italy into a new era of economic, social, political, and cultural changes dominated by an industrial economy and mass culture. This study takes what can be described as a contextualist approach to these movies, analyzing the way the filmic texts engage with particular historical and social issues, such as the representation of the tyrant and the “repressed” memory of the past fascist regime, the relation with the Italian politics of the time, and the influence of American culture in shaping the social and intertextual representation of Hercules.

This essay examines how and why the character of Hercules became so popular in the Italian movies of late Fifties and early Sixties, and how Hercules represents and negotiates some of the Italian political issues of the time. While the Herculean strongman's goal is to rid society of the evil ruler, the hero always

refuses the political power for himself; he'd rather leave the power in the hands of the legitimate heir to the throne. I show that this is the way in which the peplum genre deals with the "repressed memory" of the fascist regime: how the danger of a popular leader turning into a fascist dictator is exorcised through the narrative of a strongman hero who saves the country but refuses to be in charge of any political mandate. Finally, I show that the Herculean upper-body of the American bodybuilders playing Hercules symbolizes an idea of "American-ness" that relates to the Italian perception of the United States in the aftermath of the war. Ultimately the American Hercules in the Italian peplum genre represents the America of Truman and the Marshall Plan, and the lure of the American consumerist way of life that the Marshall Plan intended to establish in the postwar Italian society.

Echoes of Fascist Memory

As stated by Italian film historian Vittorio Spinazzola, the post-World War II period brought a surge of interest in the first experiences of democratic life — after the fascist dictatorship — that could not be totally ignored by the popular movies of the time, such as the *film d'appendice* and the peplum (61). The *film d'appendice*, coming out a decade before the movie *Hercules*, was significantly affected by the influence of a Dumas-style hero, such as the Count of Monte Cristo, a hero who struggles for revenge. Restoring order and hierarchy after the removal of a cruel usurper is natural to him, though not his main aim.

Conversely, the peplum genre creates a mythical hero who fights for a higher purpose, such as the salvation of an entire community, rather than the emptiness of personal revenge. For instance, in the movie *The Two Gladiators* (*I Due Gladiatori*, 1964), the brave legionnaire Crassus turns out to be the twin brother of the cruel Emperor Commodus, leading some Roman senators to plot to unseat the cruel brother in favor of the good one. Reluctant at first, Crassus eventually overthrows Commodus in an effort to save the people from Commodus' barbaric methods of governance. A sequence in the movie depicted through intercutting shows the starving people of Rome pleading for bread being ridiculed by guards, while a feasting Commodus wastes large quantities of food on himself and his dog. In response, Crassus leads the people's revolt against the emperor and is successful. However, when the same people, led by the Senators, want to crown him Emperor, the Legionnaire refuses, stating that "power is an inebriating drink, and I might get drunk" (*The Two Gladiators*).

The strongman hero in the sword and sandal genre would always rather leave the power in the hands of his sidekick, usually a young prince who is the rightful heir to the throne, than hold on to it himself. According to Luciano Canfora, the Greek word *Demokratia* was often used in Roman times to indicate the "dominion over the people," and that the term *demokrator* was often used

when referring to a dictator (9). Hence, Canfora implies that being a leader of the people might result — in extreme cases — in a conversion to a popular dictator. Canfora also states:

It appears so, in all its certainty, the extreme closeness of embarrassing and perhaps different forms classified by the doctrine as distant or opposed. It seems undeniable that the political experiment, or political "remedy," that has helped better to create this feeling of closeness, and to confuse the ideas of not only the masses, but also of the political theorists, is the Caesarism-Bonapartism-fascism [10].

Yet the danger of a popular leader turning into a fascist dictator, and the memory that this danger could trigger in the minds of the Italian audience after World War II, are exorcised through the narrative and the iconography of the peplum. In a sequence in *Hercules Against the Tyrants of Babylon* (*Ercole Contro I Tiranni di Babilonia*, 1964), for instance, Hercules fights alone, bare-handed, against the well-equipped Babylonian army. Babylon — in the fictional world of this movie — is a vast empire that has conquered Greece and made its inhabitants slaves, with the exception of Hercules, who arrives in the heart of the empire to free the queen Esperia. Hercules is represented as the hero of the people, using only his bare hands and superhuman strength to defeat the Babylonian army and free the masses from slavery. In terms of film language, Hercules is often shown in medium shot, with the horizon at his back. Also, he is often shot from a low angle, standing above his enemies or overlooking the masses. Similarly, the same type of shots and plot may be seen in *Son of Samson* (*Maciste nella Valle dei Re*, 1960). Here, it is Egypt that is oppressed by the evil kingdom of Persia. Again, the strongman character Maciste (who is the alter ego of Hercules in many peplum movies, as well as Goliath or Samson) arrives to head the revolt and free the masses from the evil oppressor.

Therefore the recent and yet promptly removed memory of the fascist regime in Italy is sublimated through the representation of the tyrant, while the strongman hero is purged of his potential dictatorial element inherent to the role of popular leader. Richard Dyer, talking about the Hercules series in his book *White: Essays in Race and Culture*, rightly points out that "it is usual for the hero to restore traditional authority. Significantly, unlike Mussolini, he is never himself ruler, nor explicitly identified with leadership" (174). In the Hercules series the main protagonists never seek power for themselves. Rather, they refuse to take any political office, and always reject the throne offered to them by the people they saved. Instead, at the end of the film the strongman hero is ready to ride out for a new adventure or, conversely, decides to settle down in the tranquility of the Arcadian countryside. In the movie *Hercules Unchained* (*Ercole e la Regina di Lidia*, 1959), for instance, Hercules must save his wife Iole from the clutches of the Argive army chief, who also wants to take over the vacant throne of Thebes. Yet after saving Thebes from the foreign usurper, Hercules leaves the throne of Thebes to Creon, the legitimate heir, to go away with the faithful Iole.

Hercules and Maciste fight against tyranny and, at times, against the danger of tyranny. In the movie *Hercules in the Haunted World* (*Ercole al Centro della Terra*, 1961), the hero must save the princess Deianira from Lico, the king's advisor who aspires to take over the throne. In the first frame we see Lico in medium shot, completely dressed in black, against a red and black background, calling for "the evil that will dominate the world" (*Hercules in the Haunted World*). Colors in the peplum genre are crucial semiotic signs that help indicate the characters' moral identity. Director Duccio Tessari, in his *Ten Tips for Those Who Want to Make a Historical Film*, states, "The colors of the costumes are well differentiated: white or yellow ones for the good, the bad in black or red ones. The public should immediately recognize the characters of each side" (qtd. in Locatelli 14).

That notwithstanding, the all-black raiment of a sorcerer who aspires to become a dictator may remind the Italian audience of the fascist uniform that had recently dominated Italian politics and society. The memory of this recent past is also present in the scenes of violence, war, and oppression against villages and towns. In the final sequence of *Hercules Against the Tyrants of Babylon*, for example, the film depicts the people moving, tired and wounded, toward their houses. This sequence recalls images of the devastation that Italy endured during the War, images that were already sadly familiar to Italians and had been displayed by the neo-realist cinema without the "filter" of the peplum's imaginary, mythical past.

In addition, the memory of foreign occupation and the conflict between republicans of Salò and partisans that followed the armistice of September 8, 1943, are recalled in the movie *The Loves of Hercules* (*Gli Amori di Ercole*, 1960) through the words of the tyrant Licos. Licos has imprisoned Deianira, Queen of Ecalia, and has taken over the throne. Hercules then urges the people in the surrounding countryside to march on the king's palace, in order to rescue Deianira. In the meantime, a messenger tells Licos that the citizens have joined Hercules and the peasants in their uprising:

LICOS: Our soldiers are stronger than this rabble.

MESSENGER: Many soldiers will throw down their weapons; they won't fight against their brothers.

LICOS: So let's kill these deserters to set an example.

MESSENGER: But it's a big risk!

LICOS: We have no choice! It's the only way to quell the revolt [*The Loves of Hercules*].

Although this dialogue may seem standardized and typical of the epic genre, the images evoking brothers to slaughter each other, and the use of words such as "fight against their brothers" and "deserters," actually recall the collective memory of the civil war after the fall of Fascism. At a time when the Italians were widely discredited for their acceptance of Mussolini's regime, the sacrifice of the Italian Resistance did much to salvage Italy's tarnished image, and suc-

ceeded in creating a lasting tradition of anti-Fascism. The long term objective of the Resistance was to rouse the ordinary Italian by settling scores with the past and by acknowledging the complicity of the masses under Fascism. However, this long term objective was never reached, because, as Carlo Pavone states, "paradoxically, the Resistance has partially hidden in the Italian conscience the collective responsibility toward Fascism. For the Resistance, which was the work of a minority, has been used by the majority of Italians to exonerate themselves from their fascist past" (190). The peplum genre, in evoking images of foreign occupations, war, and heroic resistance, negotiates the complex and controversial memory of this past, and the difficult transition from fascism to democracy that the Italian society faced after the war.

The Tyrant

A stout man with a receding hairline and a deep scar on his face sits at a lavishly set table. While eating with pleasure, he tells his companions his good news. Hercules is dead, and tomorrow he will have the hero's son Illus executed. Then he summons a slave girl and introduces her to his guests as Alcinoe, the daughter of the king he had killed and whose throne he usurped. This is how the despot plotting to destroy Thebes is introduced, in the film *Goliath and the Dragon* (*La Vendetta di Ercole*, 1960).

Through the character and the death of the tyrant, the peplum genre negotiates the controversial and repressed memory of the death of Mussolini. Ultimately, the death of the tyrant is always cathartic, coming at the climax of the diegetic plot, and is commonly depicted as a horrifying death. This brutality recalls the exemplary punishment of Mussolini, who was executed by the partisans along with his mistress Claretta Petacci. Mussolini's execution is still a subject of controversy in Italy: in killing the dictator and being ready to move on, the Italian society failed to question itself about its specific and collective responsibilities during the fascist regime (Luzzatto 61).

In *Hercules Unchained*, the head of the Argive army, who attempted to seize the throne of Thebes by trickery and force, is crushed on the battlefield by a wooden tower that Hercules himself topples. The sequence shows the king of Argos being crushed by the tower. While his helmet falls to the side revealing his bald head, the wicked antagonist dies in agony. In *Hercules in the Haunted World*, the sorcerer Licos is burned alive by the light of the sun, while in *The Loves of Hercules* the tyrant who had seized Deianira's throne is killed by a humanoid beast, which is then slain by Hercules. In these examples, it is almost never the hero, and much less the people, who executes the tyrant. On the contrary, the masses in the sword and sandal genre are usually depicted as incompetent, frightened, or simply immobile victims. They are ready to become supplicants of the "strong man" and liberator Hercules, but not to actively

oppose the dictatorship, much less commit tyrannicide. Moreover, the hero generally does not kill the antagonist by his own hand. The villain dies by his own doing (*Hercules in the Haunted World*), by some natural or extraordinary calamity (*The Loves of Hercules*), or amidst the “natural” violence of the battlefield (*Hercules Unchained*). His death is always “just” and “dutiful,” but no one takes the credit or responsibility.

In fact, in the peplum movies, it is the villain who pays on behalf of everyone. The only responsibility for the villain’s death lies in the innate wickedness of the antagonist himself. I would posit that this narrative repression is not very far from the interpretation of Fascism as a “digression” and the essential blamelessness of Italians during the twenty years of dictatorship. This attitude led to the notorious “continuity” of the postwar period, when the desire for social security produced a “collective purification” in the name of the unitarian experience of the Resistance. As Paul Ginsborg affirms:

The entire issue of the purge proved to be one of the most delicate problems of the time. Those who had fought in the Resistance or had suffered under Fascism demanded, with some justification, that the members of the Fascist regime not escape some form of punishment. On the other hand, purging the administration of registered Fascists meant more or less closing it down, given that membership in the Fascist Party had been obligatory for all civil servants. The activity of the purge committees succeeded in combining the worst aspects of this state of affairs. It left some of the most important directors of Fascism free, while it incriminated staff at the lowest levels. In 1960 it was calculated that 62 of the 64 serving prefects had been civil servants under Fascism. The same was true of all 135 police commissioners and their 139 deputies [120].

Between the postwar years and the economic boom, Italians wanted to forget their recent, unflattering past as soon as possible. The big screen yet again assimilated and negotiated the desire for peace and the distancing of the tragedies of war, even in memory. In *Goliath and the Dragon*, the final sequence concludes with all the citizens rebuilding Hercules’s house, which had been destroyed by the tyrant Euritus’s army. Furthermore, in the last sequence of *The Giant of Marathon* (1959), Phillipides (played by the “herculean” Steve Reeves), who has returned to his home in the countryside, lays down his sword by sticking it into the plowed land and walks off toward the horizon with his wife Andromeda. On the right of the screen, a pair of oxen is depicted in long shot, which symbolize the “healthy” toils of farmers and the peaceful life of the fields. These images contribute to feeding the view of Fascism as a “digression” in Italian history, which only momentarily veiled the true, fundamentally positive character of Italians, an interpretation which was commonplace throughout Italy in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, the peplum highlights the difficult negotiation that Italy continued to face, by interpreting its history and addressing its repressed memory.

It is essential to consider that in the period from 1957 through 1965 (when these movies were produced) the country was ruled by the Christian Democrats

(DC), a center-right party based on Christian values, with strong opposition to the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Given the economic support that the peplums received from the Italian government at the time (unlike other films such as Mauro Bolognini’s *La Viaccia* and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Accattone*, considered too leftist), Hercules does not simply represent anti-Fascism; he evokes a concept of “freedom” used in the ideological terms of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, for which Italy became one of the most heated battlefields. As we have seen, Hercules, Maciste, and Goliath are strong men, saviors of an oppressed people who avoid the danger of dictatorship by being ontological incarnations of absolute good. The peplum genre is linked to the portrayal of “traditional” tyrannical powers. There are clear references to Nazi-like regimes (*Hercules and the Captive Women*, 1961), general references to subjugated peoples (*Hercules Against the Tyrants of Babylon*), and to advisers who aspire to usurp the throne (*Maciste, Gladiator of Sparta*, 1964). However, the emphasis on a poor people exploited by the rich and powerful has no “revolutionary” intent, since the framework of these films is clearly conservative at a narrative and semiotic level. For instance, in *The Loves of Hercules*, the people rise up against the tyrant Licos on Hercules’s instigation. Hercules, however, is not fighting for the people’s social demands, but rather fights to restore the legitimate sovereign to the throne. The revolt of the people in the movie is not linked to a socialist and/or communist ideal, nor is it a cinematic representation of the Pelizza da Volpedo painting *Fourth Estate* (1901). Rather, it is a defense of the legitimate monarchy, which is threatened by a foreign usurper. The same mechanism works in the movie *Son of Samson*, which opens with a massacre sequence. Persian soldiers attack an Egyptian village, slaughter the men, and take the women as slaves. While in the background the caravan of slaves is presumably headed to Persia, in the foreground a horrible death is in store for the survivors. They are buried alive up to their necks in the desert sand and left to die. The image of the heads of the dying sticking out of the sand was rather strong with respect to the traditional canons of the peplum. The succeeding sequence depicted a group of poor Egyptians in an audience with the Pharaoh, explaining what the Persians are doing in his name: “We are poor people, but we can not lie. We have come to reveal to you the great injustices that are being carried out in your name, because we know that you are just and good and that you love your people” (*Son of Samson*). In fact, the Pharaoh is portrayed as a “great elder,” who is wise and paternal toward his suffering people. However, because of his old age, he is virtually powerless to oppose the maneuvers of his consort, who is betraying him with the Great Vizier, an ally of the Persian enemies. Suddenly, the hero Maciste appears to help the Egyptian people restore power to the legitimate heir, the Pharaoh’s young, “progressive” son.

Thus Hercules is not Spartacus. He isn’t the revolutionary leader who aims to subvert an existing social order, but a defender of democracy who tries to re-establish a usurped government. In an Italy that preferred “continuity

between fascist fascism and democratic fascism,” rather than the radical change dreamed of and hoped for during the Resistance, Hercules and Maciste are conservative heroes who offer simple dreams of justice and social equity to an audience eager for peace and stability (Pasolini 129).

What I assert here is that the peplum puts a negotiatory strategy into action, which placates the audience’s anxieties—particularly those of the lower classes—through a powerful superman who is able to re-establish a principle of justice and social equity. At the same time, however, he is respectful of the legitimate and socially accepted authority and thus avoids both the absolutist trap of the Fascist past and the highly feared drift toward Italy’s first experiments with a center-left, communist government.

America

In trying to express Hercules’ impact on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we will find that “the children of Hercules” still live and walk among us. They have merely left the rugged Peloponnese for the more hospitable climes of Malibu and Venice Beach.

— Alastair Blanshard

Although the peplum is an autochthonous genre, born in Italy and using characters from classical literature, the actors were often American. The most famous was Steve Reeves, a Mr. Universe discovered by Pietro Francisci in his adolescent son’s bodybuilding magazine. There was also Gordon Mitchell, a high school science teacher and bodybuilding enthusiast; Gordon Scott, an ex-Marine; Reg Park, an Englishman who won Mr. Universe in 1951, 1958, and 1965; Mark Forest, an Italian-American from Brooklyn, New York; and Mickey Hargitay, more prominent for his marriage with Jayne Mansfield (with whom he filmed *The Loves of Hercules*) than for his athletic and bodybuilding talent. This selection of actors, together with the portrayal of Hercules as liberator of a people oppressed by a despot and/or foreign occupation, has led some scholars to identify Hercules with the United States during the Liberation of Europe (Günsberg; Abruzzese). For my argument, Hercules does not symbolize America the Liberator, but depicts the America of Truman and the Marshall Plan. As Alberto Savinio observes, it portrays the America of consumerism and social well-being, the America “of liberalism and democracy” (92).

The identification of Hercules with the United States did not originate with the peplum. Before cinema, there was theater. In 1950 Savinio, an Italian writer, painter, playwright, and the younger brother of the painter Giorgio De Chirico, wrote the play *Alceste di Samuele*, adapting Euripides’s tragedy *Alceste*. Savinio transported the drama from ancient Greece to World War II, making Alceste a Jewish woman. Savinio chose Hercules to be portrayed by Franklin

Delano Roosevelt, the thirty-second President of the United States. In the play, one of the characters on stage is the Author, who exclaims:

Mr. Franklin Delano Roosevelt! I salute you as the last in a series of Hercules who, from time to time, have raised their clubs, brandished their swords, and directed their minds—no less strong than the club and no less sharp than the sword—in defense of good against evil, light against darkness, freedom against slavery, and the dignity of man against subjugation and humiliation. You have carried out the greatest of Hercules’s labors. Now the lesser of those labors await you. Are you familiar with the play *Alceste*? [96–97].

Savinio thus identified Hercules with the United States in the 1950s, calling the mythical hero “the purest expression of democracy and liberalism” (95). Moreover, he affirmed that *l’ercolismo* (the quality of being Hercules) is “closely connected to the liberal and democratic concept, and Hercules, being of a political mind, is liberal and democratic” (92). The tone of Savinio’s work, particularly in the dialogue between Roosevelt and the Author, straddles the line between serious and grotesque. The two characters converse about postwar international politics, the western and eastern blocs, and the role of the United States. The Author strongly insists on calling Roosevelt “the champion of 19th century herculism,” as if America’s role as a land of freedom ended with World War II (93). Finally, Roosevelt, the symbol of a Herculean America, descends into the underworld like Hercules in the myth. Unlike Hercules, however, the President dies along with Alceste. For Savinio, the war marked the end of the nineteenth-century and its ideals of liberalism and democracy.

Ten years later, in Italian sword and sandal cinema, Hercules is no longer Roosevelt, the heroic President of World War II, but Truman, the controversial “hero” of Italy’s postwar reconstruction, which began with the European Recovery Program (ERP), the official name of the Marshall Plan, “the largest international propaganda campaign ever seen in times of peace” (Ellwood 87). For its specific geo-political and historical conditions, the Americans chose Italy as the focal point of the information campaign that accompanied the delivery of food aid, although not without some dissent. The Marshall Plan was a means of projecting American hegemony into Europe and exporting their economic policies.

Most important is the extent to which the Marshall Plan’s reconstruction of Italian identity influenced the images of the sword and sandal movies. There are, in fact, various analogies between the vision of Italy assembled by ERP officials and the one constructed by the peplum genre. As David Ellwood affirms, the majority of ERP documentaries portray Italy as a small and simple country, mostly agricultural and oppressed by the weight of its history. This is contrasted with America’s dynamism and power to help, a notion which is predicated on the myth of ships arriving with loads of primary goods (Ellwood 100). For instance, in *Goliath and the Dragon*, Hercules returns home, where his wife and son are waiting for him. Along the way the hero visits his farm

properties and is greeted by his subjects, farmers, and shepherds, who are struggling with the hard work of the fields. A few sequences show Hercules intent on helping them. In one scene, Hercules helps some shepherds repair a beam that had fallen from the roof of their hut. In the next sequence, the hero uproots a tree with his bare hands, a tree that the farmers had been trying to remove in vain with oxen pulling ropes. Everywhere he goes, Hercules is always greeted and acclaimed by the people, who recognize him for alleviating their daily toils. Just as the Marshall Plan was presented as the only way to liberate Italy from poverty and backwardness, Hercules frees his subjects from the hardest physical labors and helps them rebuild their country.

Hercules is the flaunted prosperity of the Marshall Plan, the attraction to new forms of consumption, the promise that one day Italians will all be strong and powerful like him, and like America. “You can be like us,” said the ERP (Elwood 113). It wasn’t so much actual prosperity as it was potential prosperity that was depicted in cinemas and contributed to shaping the American dream in Italy. Various studies have brought the Marshall Plan into question and put its economic significance into perspective, for it did not achieve all its aims, precisely due to a lack of analysis of the European context (Ellwood 100–101). However, historians still concur on the political and psychological impact of this American influence in Italy, particularly at the level of popular imagination and mass culture. Among all European countries, Italy has been the leader in importing the greatest number of American films each year. In the postwar period, they were the principal means through which the American way of life penetrated the Italian imagination and dreams (Brunetta 9). With the economic miracle close at hand, it was precisely cinema that created a hybrid character of Italian origin with an American body, used American funds for Italian production, and depicted industrial ambitions against the backdrop of a rural landscape. For these reasons, the hybrid character of Hercules was able to negotiate for his audience Italy’s complex transformation during the boom.

Hercules and Maciste appear in an environmental context that seems to belong, by right, to Italy’s cultural substratum and even to its landscape. However, the heroes are industrial products imported from a foreign and more developed civilization, beginning with their bodies, where artificiality substitutes nature. Rational muscle building, a high protein diet, and the new bodybuilding craze symbolize the prosperity imported from a society of mass culture and consumption (Salotti 151). The fact that the sculpted body became a “myth” is also proven by its depiction in the artistic trend which reflects and revises mass culture the most, Pop Art, which was born and developed roughly at the same time as the peplum genre. In fact, among the new myths of consumerism that Pop Art artists chose to represent, one that is depicted symbolically most often is the “new” body of the 1960s “modern” man and woman. Thus the body itself becomes a form of consumption, as evidenced by pin-ups and their male counterparts. Examples of the latter include the bodybuilder in Richard Hamil-

ton’s famous collage *Just What Was It That Made Yesterday’s Home So Different, So Appealing* (1956) and Italian artist Mario Ceroli’s *Mr. Muscolo*, a wooden sculpture of a man flexing his muscles in the classic bodybuilder pose, presented for the first time in 1964.

The Herculean hero of the peplum is therefore a hybrid creation, born in the Italian film genre system from classical parentage, but with a body that belongs to the American bodybuilding culture. As with the cinematic Hercules, the peplum genre itself is a hybrid, situated between Italy and the United States. It is characterized by a double dialectic of a “meager” budget and production, on the one hand, and “noble” intentions on the other. For Italian producers, directors, and scriptwriters, producing peplum movies meant spending an “Italian” low budget, while trying to convince the audience that they were watching an expensive American epic. As Stefano Della Casa explains in *Una postilla sul cinema mitologico*, the peplum genre’s main characteristic is indeed “the will to be something it’s not” (163).

Is Hercules, thus, America? He is, yet more. The superheroes of Technicolor cinema embody the memories of silent film’s athletes and acrobats, a manager’s bourgeois desires, the heroic dimension of American comics, memories past, and the present desire for release. The American dream is literally materialized in the artificial, health fanatic, and consumerist physicality of the bodybuilder starring in Italian films. In the peplum, fantasy prevails over realism, and the desires imported from another culture are embodied by a hero from Italy’s literary and cinematic past. Perhaps this is why the mythical hero has traveled from Italy to the United States, from the wonderful Cinecittà of the 1960s to the frenetic Hollywood of today. A guiding thread composed of “Classicism, Californianism, barbarianism and crucifixionism” ties the Mediterranean Sea with the shores of the Pacific, transporting the heroes of the Italian sword and sandal genre into the cavern of wonders of contemporary Hollywood, a Vulcan’s forge of new deities and new universal mythologies (Dyer 150). Cinema has the technical capacity to either resuscitate a world that no longer exists, or to imagine one that never existed. As memories can be real, so, too, can an audience reinvent themselves and their past.

The Hercules series helped to negotiate the difficult transition from the fascist dictatorship to democracy in Italy after the war, and the relations with the American lifestyle and the upcoming economic and cultural changes of the Sixties. It accomplished this task in three distinct ways. Firstly, its main hero is a fearless strongman who—although devoted to restore a peaceful and rightful government threatened by tyrants—never identifies himself with any political leadership, as this would be a painful and disturbing reminder of Mussolini, the “strongman” of the past fascist regime. Secondly, although the hero does defeat the tyrant, he generally does not kill the antagonist by his own hands. It is the villain who pays on behalf of everyone, symbolizing the Italians’ common view of Fascism as a “digression” in Italian history, and the essential blameless-

ness of Italians during the twenty years of dictatorship. The Herculean character embodies a concept of conservative democratic “freedom,” which is able to avoid both the absolutist trap of the Fascist past and the highly feared drift toward a communist government. Lastly, the American body of Hercules is the semantic sign that negotiates the contradiction between Italian national identity and desire of the Other. It relates to the new myth of American mass culture and consumerism, which Italy eagerly embraced after the war and, in turn, helped shape cultural changes during the Italian economic boom. Thus, by shifting the emphasis from national cultural matters to industrial and sociological issues, the peplum opens up the possibility of further exploration of the connections between Hollywood and Cinecittà regarding genre, masculinity, and the transnational — a possibility bound together by the brawny, muscular form of Hercules himself.

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On the cover: Reg Park in the title role of *Hercules in the Haunted
World*, 1961; details from poster art of the films (top) *Atlas*, 1961
and (bottom) *Samson and the Seven Miracles of the World*, 1961

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