medium (Malamud and McGuire; Margaret Malamud 1998). Las Vegas celebrates empire. Monumental building projects are an expression of an imperial self, and the American investors, designers, and builders of Las Vegas's empire in the sands are implicitly associated with the ancient Romans who constructed edifices like the Colosseum and, more fantastically, with the spectacular sets of Hollywood's Romes. At Caesars Palace, the empires of Las Vegas and Hollywood are joined and conflated with the larger geopolitical American empire, and gamblers and guests revel in this celebration of empire. Architecture and interior design engage all five senses in a projection of Rome; the visitor is not simply a spectator but a participant in this projection. Shaped from other artifacts of popular culture's Romes, Las Vegas also collapses them. In Las Vegas's Roman pleasure palace, Hollywood's images of a lavish and decadent Roman empire become part of the patron's experience in a material way. The invitation to be like the Romans within the confines of the casino-hotel is mediated in part by an assimilation that identifies a Roman imperial elite with film and entertainment stars (Malamud and McGuire). Moreover, here, the typical association of imperial Rome with luxury and decadence translates into a particular economy of spending. Fully immersed in sights, sounds, and sensations, the patron/client participates in Roman conquest and luxury by spending money in the casino, dining rooms, and hotel. In effect, Caesars translates the conquest and wealth of empire into guests' own expenditures. The Caesars Palace complex is continually undergoing renovations and additions, including, in 1992, an opulent Roman-themed shopping mall (Margaret Malamud 1998). In Las Vegas, there is no sign of a decline of either the Roman or the American empires. Ridley Scott's film *Gladiator* also suggests that "imperial projections" will continue to thrive and ancient Rome may continue to serve the twenty-first century as it served the twentieth.

1 Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie

William Fitzgerald

Legions tramp across the screen and toiling slaves are lashed as a voice-over intones solemnly on the irresistible might of Rome: brutal, arrogant, and cruel, but destined to be overcome by a gentle faith that will blow away the curse of slavery.[1] The opening of a toga movie, with its combination of montage and voice-over, situates us firmly in the position of outsiders, even when, as in *The Robe*, that voice belongs to a Roman, the tribune Gallio (Richard Burton), speaking cynically and wearily about a Rome that has created its own gods and whose ruling class is now free to do just as it pleases. It is a perspective that has no use for culture and that implicitly dismisses the *Aeneid*'s version of Rome's beneficent imperialism with a scorn worthy of Tacitus's Calgacus ("Where they make a desert, they call it peace," Tacitus *Agricola* 30). As for literature, there is Nero, in terrible voice, singing while Rome burns, but Petronius's *Satyricon* is nowhere mentioned in the movie in which the great Roman novelist features so prominently (*Quo Vadis*). In the opening voice-over of *Spartacus*, the words of "the poet" about golden Rome are quoted ironically as we watch slaves toil under the lash while quarrying rocks on a steep mountain somewhere in Death Valley. There is room for only one book in this world: the good book, quoted in paternal tones by the ubiquitous Finlay Currie at the beginning of *Ben-Hur*. Heavy irony is squeezed from the Romans' failure to distinguish Christianity from any number of other "subversive" fads that will be forgotten in a matter of years. Roman soldiers, officers, and magistrates witness world-historical events without noticing them because they haven't read the Bible. But the (implied) audience has, and that is what provides our entry into the ancient world.

Take, for example, the beginning of *The Sign of the Cross*. After an introductory scene that plunges us *in medias res*—the burning Rome of 64 C.E., with Nero, lyre in hand, conceiving the plan to shift the blame onto the Christians—the smoke of the conflagration clears, a pastoral flute is heard, and we find ourselves on an ordinary Roman street. Two beefy and very hairy men are playing dice while discussing the prospects of snaring a Christian and pocketing the emperor's reward. An old man with a staff looks around him in a puzzled way; like us, he comes from out of town, dropped here, perhaps, by a time machine. He's looking for someone. Another old man with a staff comes our way; the first old man draws something in the dirt in front of him and the second completes it: the sign of the cross. They talk, and, after they part, we see the sign, trodden but not erased by the feet that pass on the street. We know where history is going better than the owners of those feet know what is going on around them.

In the toga movie, you know where you stand. But beneath the crude dualistic structures and oversized emotions of this genre, I argue, there are more complex and troubled negotiations in process, as we might expect given the transitional nature of the historical period within which most of them were made (1951–64). The basic "us and them" structure, pitting a decadent Old World against a healthy New World on the rise, holds up a mirror to postwar America as it stands poised for global leadership, but this structure also reveals a layered series of complementarities, antagonisms, and ambiguities *within* American culture itself. One of the antagonisms that I will be exploring is that between public and private, resolved in the romance of conversion when the Roman military man leaves a hopelessly compromised Rome with his new Christian wife. But after *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and *Quo Vadis* (1951), the classic movies of conversion, this structure ceases to drive the narrative; instead, the main emotional force is generated by the unresolved and awkward intensity of homoerotic relationships between young men. I want to suggest that these impossible relationships, fostered by the cruel demands of the Roman father, contain utopian longings for a redemption of the public sphere.

Oppositions and Identifications

The world of the toga movie is structured around an opposition in which Rome is always one pole. The primary Roman/Christian opposition has its analogues in Romans and slaves (*Spartacus*), Rome and Egypt (*Cleopatra*), even Rome the metropolis and Rome the empire (*The Fall of the Roman Empire*); whatever the issue that organizes the opposition, the first term is always devalued in relation to the second. Of these oppositions, the most important, of course, is that between Romans and Christians, a theme that the movies inherited from Victorian fiction and drama: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), the international blockbusters *Quo Vadis?* (Henryk Sienkiewicz 1896) and *Ben-Hur* (Lew Wallace 1880), and the hugely successful play *The Sign of the Cross* (Wilson Barrett 1895). In these works, history is caught at some imaginary turning point, or anticipation of the turning point, between the Roman and Christian worlds; the Christians, a small minority with history on their side, are being cruelly persecuted by the decadent Romans. David Mayer (1994.13) has described how this opposition might reflect class tensions in the world of the audience, which was itself strikingly heterogeneous. The classical education of the upper classes was given short shrift as it ran up against the authority of the working-class classic, the Bible. Hollywood's casting of the toga movie tells a slightly different story: the Romans, at least the decadent or evil Romans, are generally played by English or European actors, and the Christians (or their equivalents) speak in the accents, and trade in the sentiments, of the New World (Wood 1975.183–84). We are left in no doubt about where the future lies. This model for the relation between the older and the newer culture has its ancient equivalent in the views that the Romans and the Greeks had of each other: to the Greeks, the Romans might appear boorish upstarts; to the Romans, the Greeks could be seen as the decadent products of a tired civilization that was too clever by half in the first place (Balsdon 1979.38–39, 161–62). In modern times, Europeans who saw their ascendancy waning comforted themselves on being Greeks to the upstart Americans' Romans, but, given the right spin, Americans might proudly agree (Hitchens 1990.22–37). After all, for the newly independent states after the American Revolution, republican Rome had been both an ideal and a model. But there was another Rome, the Rome of the Caesars, and its image was more volatile.[2] In the Hollywood toga movie, the Romans, in all their imperial decadence, now appear as the older culture and the Christians have the advantage of both history and righteousness.

The Romans-and-Christians scenario has other advantages for Hollywood. Mainstream American values, identified with Christianity, can be experienced as revolutionary: persecuted rather than persecuting, the possession of a plucky minority with history on its side. Insofar as "Christian" values unify a ragtag assortment of ordinary people, they can

claim to offer the best hope of a common culture for a heterogeneous nation founded on opposition to tyranny (Mayer 1994.14). But the opposition between Romans and Christians serves, as we shall see, not only to establish a deep historical identity for a young nation, it also dramatizes oppositions *within* American culture. "Incidental" aspects of American culture (consumerism, entertainment, gigantism, hypermasculinism) can be pitted against its true heart (sentiment, the family, a domesticating femininity). In terms of its own historical context, too, the negative image of Rome has both an external and an internal application. In the period during which most of these toga movies were made, the United States was adjusting to its postwar status as leader of the "free" world and enjoying an extraordinary boom in affluence. The treatment of the Roman empire in these movies, at least until the 1964 *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, is universally negative: oppression is the only possible consequence of power. On the one hand, the Roman empire stands for the tyrannies of the decadent Old World that the United States had overcome in the recent war, but, on the other hand, it provides a monitory image of what the United States might itself become.[1] Meanwhile, the only kind of triumphalism that is openly celebrated is that of another world, the realm of the spirit rather than of secular power. For these movies, Christianity's triumph in the world still lies in the future.

Clearly, the postwar years that saw the resurgence of the Hollywood epic carried with them anxieties about empire and wealth that are reflected in the representation of imperial Rome. Is the alternative to isolation a corrupting imperialism? Can prosperity be enjoyed without it devolving into a runaway consumerism? For the most part, the movies do not probe these questions, and the stark polarity of Roman and Christian allows for little nuance. But there is a distinction to be made between the identifications that are encouraged on the narrative level and the thrills that are experienced on the level of spectacle, a distinction that allows the audience to have its cake and eat it, to be in two places at once.[4] This bilocation is one manifestation of the conflict between pleasure and guilt that Madison Avenue identified as the main psychological feature of the young consumers of the fifties, more affluent than their parents and looking for the moral permission to have fun (Halberstam 1993.506–07). The decadent power and extravagance of the Romans could be enjoyed, appropriated, and, at the same time, disowned from the early Christian point of view. In this, the toga movie reflects a strategy that itself has Roman roots, for Roman writers liked to represent the city of Rome as a palimpsest, in which the poor origins of a rustic community

were overlaid by the magnificence of the imperial capital (Edwards 1996.31–43). The *locus classicus* is Aeneas's visit to the site of Rome "golden now, then rough with woodland thickets" (*Aeneid* 8.348), where Evander reads him a lecture on the virtues of poverty. Such passages create both pride in the difference between then and now and a sense of the underlying moral foundations of the golden city. Similarly, the toga movie both hearkens back to the War of Independence, when an emerging and righteous nation struggled against the oppressor, and conjures up a spectacle of power and splendor that accords better with contemporary realities and measures how far the nation has come.

This secondary, spectacular identification with Roman power is made clear in the original trailer to *Quo Vadis* (included on the video release), that promises that we will join with Rome's roaring multitudes as they greet their general. This was the year (1951) of MacArthur's recall and triumphant return from Korea, and, in those roaring multitudes, the American audience may indeed see its own image as crowds flock to the spectacle of Marcus Vinicius's triumph and enjoy the glorious Technicolor of it all. Rome is not only the decadent Old World about to be superseded, but also an aspect of the American self.[5] As Michael Wood argues, the awesome splendor of Rome is not so much represented in these movies as recreated by the power of American technology and money.[6] *Ben-Hur*, for instance, recreates a full-scale arena in Italy complete with 40,000 tons of sand. But this kind of recreation by duplication is not entirely new. In 1888, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema imported from the south of France, at enormous cost, massive quantities of roses for his painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, thus rivaling the extravagant decadence of his subject.[7] In fact, the power of recreation with which a newer civilization brings to life, even outdoes, the glories of the past, making visible and real what is otherwise known only through books, is the very power that was attributed by Martial to the imperial arena in ancient Rome. Pasiphaë mates with a bull before the eyes of the audience and the truth of the myth is vindicated (Martial *Book of Spectacles* 5): "Let aged antiquity cease to admire itself. Whatever Fame sings of, the arena makes real to [the emperor]." The recycling of this aspect of imperial self-confidence is itself one of the forms in which modern America, in the form of Hollywood, duplicates ancient Rome.

As Maria Wyke has vividly demonstrated, the very enterprise of filming the movies was sometimes represented as an imperial or military endeavor on a Roman scale. The press coverage of the making of *Quo Vadis* in postwar Italy assimilated the production team to an invading

army (Wyke 1997b.142). Hollywood directors saw themselves, and were seen, as emperors, but they reflected a more benign version of the Roman emperor's power: DeMille gave work to thousands of ordinary people as extras in the Depression, becoming a positive version of his screen despot Nero in *The Sign of the Cross*. In postwar Italy, LeRoy does the same when he films *Quo Vadis*, giving the food left over from the orgies to charities for Italian children (Wyke 1997b.137, 145). To this tendency of moviemaking to duplicate, as well as to represent, Rome, one might attribute also the internecine struggles over the script of *Spartacus*. With its blacklisted author (Dalton Trumbo) and its sacked director (Anthony Mann, replaced by Stanley Kubrick), its endless rewritings and ideological wrangling, the making of the movie comes to mirror, in its complexity and animus, the political maneuverings at Rome over the rebellion itself (Cooper 1991a and b). During the making of the 1963 *Cleopatra*, the romance of Antony and Cleopatra was duplicated offscreen by the scandalous affair between its principals, Liz Taylor and Richard Burton, blown up by the press to the proportions of an epic saga (Wyke 1997b.101–05). The world of empires, palaces, and world-historical figures is duplicated by the world of global superstars.

If our position as the pampered "subjects" of Hollywood aligns us at times with the Roman subjects of Nero, the structure of the toga movie's world enables us to be in two places at the same time, to have an alibi. When the arena's endlessly varied bill of sadistic fare turns surfeit into nausea (for instance, in *The Sign of the Cross*), we can pretend that we have been waiting all along in the dungeon with the Christians as the transfiguring moment of truth draws near. And when Laurence Olivier's Crassus, watching the legions framed by the window of his magnificent villa (Hearst Castle), speaks of the insuperable might of Rome, we can thrill to his words and then claim that, like his slave Antoninus (Tony Curtis), we've already run away to join the rebellion. It is *Spartacus* that provides the only moment in a toga movie when the audience is actually *accused* of complicity with the Roman spectators who command the spectacle of men killing each other. When the gladiator Draba refuses to kill the defeated Spartacus and instead hurls his trident at Crassus and his entourage, the trident comes flying right at the camera; the fact that Draba is black only accentuates the disturbing parallelism between the slave-owning Roman spectators and the American moviegoers.

Belief

However much we may be implicated in the spectacular aspects of the Roman empire, everything about the presentation of the Romans on the narrative level suggests an effete, played-out, and corrupt civilization in which no one believes any more. This lack of belief, more than anything else, is identified as the sickness that is eating away at Rome. Readers of the *Aeneid*, with its sonorous endorsements of Rome's mission, will be puzzled. At the end of *Quo Vadis*, Nero has been deposed and the legions of Galba are entering Rome. Marcus and Fabius are discussing the task that Galba has before him. Rehearsing the succession of empires ("Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Rome"), Marcus wonders what will be next. "A more permanent world, I hope. Or a more permanent faith," says Fabius, to which Marcus adds, "One is not possible without the other." The emperor Claudius in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* says of the Christian Demetrius that he possesses what Rome has not had since the early days of the republic: something to believe in.

Though the Christian perspective on the Romans' lack of belief organizes the primary identification of an American audience with the Christians, the Roman perspective on the Christians provides an outlet for a down-to-earth, "show me" skepticism. When the Roman Marcus, having failed to dissuade Mercia from martyrdom, decides to walk up the steps into the arena with her in *The Sign of the Cross*, he declares passionately, "I believe in *you*, not this Christ." Mercia knows better, confident that Marcus's romantic instincts are now in line with his better self and that it is Christianity to which he is opening his heart.

Belief, in these movies, is whatever comes from the heart, but the possibility that belief might involve surrender of the self to some external authority has to be handled with care. Mainstream American culture of the Cold War period is conflicted about true believers and anxious about the specter of fanaticism that haunts the world of early Christianity. When *Ben-Hur*'s Messala arrives in Judaea he is told that the Jews are "drunk on religion." The speaker is a Roman, and therefore suspect, but the Romans are not infrequently used to voice (maybe to exorcise) the concerns of the implied audience. Of course, when *Rome* is spoken of with religious fervor, belief begins to take on the lineaments of political extremism. The fanatical devotion of Crassus in *Spartacus* ("Rome is an eternal idea in the mind of God") comes across as more than a little deranged, glossed as it is by his speech to Antoninus, apropos the sight of the legions: "There, boy, is Rome—there is the might, majesty, the terror

of Rome. There is the power that bestrides the known world like a colossus. No man can withstand Rome, no nation can withstand her—how much less a boy . . . There's only one way to deal with Rome, Antoninus: you must serve her, you must abase yourself before her, you must grovel at her feet, you must—love her." This speech has now acquired new resonances, coming as it does just after the recently restored "oysters and snails" scene in which Crassus tries to seduce Antoninus. It is indicative of the ambivalence of belief that, in *Spartacus*, the Roman antagonists of the fanatical Crassus are played by Charles Laughton (Gracchus) and Peter Ustinov (Lentulus Batiatus, the *lanista*), the Neros of *The Sign of the Cross* and *Quo Vadis* respectively. Here these erstwhile tyrants play pragmatic, fallible but ultimately lovable characters. When contrasted with the fanatical belief of Crassus, the childish self-indulgence of the emperor Nero appears as the attractive humanity of *l'homme moyen sensuel*.

It is not until the generically unorthodox *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) that the word "Rome" conjures up an ideal that a decent person might reasonably believe in, a multicultural ideal eloquently expressed by Marcus Aurelius before a gathering of dignitaries from the corners of the empire at a frontier fort in Germany.[8] He holds out the prospect of "golden centuries of peace, a true *pax Romana*," promising that, "Wherever you live, whatever the color of your skin, when peace is achieved it will bring to all—all—the supreme right of Roman citizenship . . . A family of equal nations. That is what lies ahead." Johnson gave his "Great Society" speech in the year of this movie and, a year earlier, Martin Luther King, Jr., had addressed the march on Washington ("I have a dream").[9] The figure of Marcus Aurelius is just remote enough to stand for a conflation of the two. Later in *Fall*, the senator played by Finlay Currie (who played Saint Peter in *Quo Vadis* and the wise man Balthasar in *Ben-Hur*), explicitly raises the issue of belief when he declares that a civilization falls when people cease to believe in it. The casting of Finlay Currie, with its reference to two earlier Romans-and-Christians movies, makes the point that this one will not drain the secular, public sphere of the ethical weight that the genre usually reserves exclusively for religion.

But, in the Romans-and-Christians movies, the possibility that the Roman public sphere, in which no one believes any more, might be regenerated by the new religious belief is studiously avoided. To the Romans, Christianity itself may appear to be a subversive political creed, but any accusations of disloyalty to the state are stoutly and routinely denied by the movie Christians, who have no revolutionary ambitions. In

Barabbas, for instance, the eponymous hero, an outlaw saved from the cross by Jesus' crucifixion, tangles with the cruel machinery of Roman justice and encounters Christian converts at every turn. Stubbornly refusing the faith that he encounters in others, he is finally won over when he hears that the Christians are burning Rome, and he joins in with gusto. He is apprehended and thrown into prison with his "fellow" Christians who tell him he has got it all wrong: the rumor he has helped to confirm is false. No doubt some in the audience will share his disappointment. But, occasionally, the Roman perspective on Christian sedition chimes uncannily with contemporary political paranoias. After Tiberius in *The Robe* has heard Gallio's eyewitness account of the Crucifixion, he says, "When it comes, this is how it will start. Some obscure martyr in some forgotten province. Then madness, infecting the legions, rotting the empire, then the finish of Rome . . . Man's desire to be free. It is the greatest madness of all." This is not entirely ironic in the America of 1953, which saw itself menaced by a fanatical ideology predicated (like the United States itself) on freedom; it demonstrates clearly the uneasiness that lies at the heart of the genre's embracing of belief. Tiberius here speaks as the guarantor of political stability and, as such, he speaks for most of the audience. Because Christianity is no longer a persecuted, revolutionary movement, and because the United States is now a great power, "threatened" by a revolutionary movement infiltrating its fabric, the genre allows, even demands from the audience a certain mobility of identification between its polarities. But when Tiberius proceeds to ask Gallio to return to Judaea, investigate the Christians further, and bring him "names," shadows of McCarthyism deepen (Babington and Evans 1993.211). The belief of the early Christians, who, at this stage, have no stake in the status quo, is highly volatile when applied to the political world of the mid-fifties.[10] This volatility allows for a subversive subtext, but also calls for strenuous denial.

Quo Vadis, which contains the interchange quoted above on the need for a more permanent belief, is an instructive example of the problematic relationship between Christian belief and the public sphere. Probably the most complex figure in the toga movie genre is the Petronius of *Quo Vadis* (Leo Genn), an ironic and urbane observer who smiles at both the megalomaniacal antics of Nero and the fervent hopes of the Christians. His secular "Last Supper" before his suicide appears to be a more humane form of heroism in the face of death than that of the martyrs, and his Old World urbanity and aestheticism offer an attractive alternative to the contrasting drives for transcendence of Nero and the Chris-

tians.[11] And yet Petronius's noncommittal and evenhanded irony comes in for sharp criticism—from himself. Shortly before the final gathering of friends in front of whom he commits suicide, Petronius recants his detachment, accusing himself of being content, out of force of habit, to be an amused cynic: content to let others shape the world. In 1951, this may speak to contemporary American concerns about isolationism and the responsibilities that come with power, even if those concerns, coming as they do from a European sophisticate, may also conjure up *le trahison des clercs* under the tyrannies of fascism. But what are we to make of the movie's ending in the light of Petronius's regret that he had allowed others to shape the world? Our converted hero Marcus Vinicius, having watched the troops of Galba enter Rome and having delivered himself of the remark about the need for a more permanent world with a more permanent belief, proceeds to leave Rome with his beloved Lygia to start a family. As the troops march into Rome, he rides his wagon out. Now that Marcus is a Christian, his world has shrunk to the private sphere with which a generalized contemporary Christianity is associated.

Public and Private

Petronius's recantation does not conflict with the happy ending of Marcus and Lygia because the toga movie's dualistic structure (Romans and Christians, etc.) corresponds roughly to a compartmentalized separation of public and private in American culture itself. Rome in these movies is a cruel, oppressive, and ubiquitous presence, a fetishized name that represents for its subjects the unavoidable and the undefeatable.[12] Rome will indeed fall, but not yet, not in this movie. Prognostications and foreshadowings abound, most spectacularly the fire of Rome (*Quo Vadis*, *The Sign of the Cross*) and the eruption of Vesuvius (*The Last Days of Pompeii*), but more subtly in speeches like Tiberius's on the Christian threat in *The Robe* (quoted above). But Rome does not fall.[13] Here again, the genre allows the audience to have it both ways. We can dream, even actively will, the fall of the oppressor Rome under the comforting knowledge that it will remain there, at least for a century or so, preserving the status quo in all its spectacular glory but without commanding our respect or loyalty any more. We can cultivate our own gardens, or return to the plough, secure in the knowledge that there's nothing to be done and that eventually history will take its beneficent course. Meanwhile, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's . . ."

Ben-Hur's epic trajectory through the Roman world brings him back to the place where he began, his lavishly appointed house, embraced by

mother, sister, and a family slave, about to become his wife. "Be wise, Judah. It's a Roman world," says Messala to his Judaean friend at the beginning of the movie, and even though his advice goes unheeded, our hero finds that he must come to terms with Rome. No one can get around the fact that it's a Roman world, but once that world has been successfully negotiated, the nuclear family can pick up with life. It is as if the whole of the movie fills in the bits that the fifties sitcoms leave out: what happens to father between the time he finishes breakfast and the moment he calls, "Honey, I'm home." In Lew Wallace's novel on which the movie is based, Ben-Hur, realizing that the Messiah does not call for a military struggle against Rome on the part of his followers, desists from the rebellion on which he has embarked and, instead, devotes his fortune to the building of the catacombs. The theme of rebellion appears in the 1959 movie only as the desire for revenge, from which Ben-Hur is dissuaded by the Christianized characters; his ex-slave and future wife Esther, for instance, warns him that he is becoming the very thing he set out to destroy. Nothing at the end of the movie suggests that there is work to be done outside the family home.

The refusal of power and the turn away from the public world to the private is not restricted to the Romans-and-Christians movies; it provides a striking ending to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, practically the only toga movie that has no Christian presence.[14] Our hero Livius has killed the corrupt emperor Commodus in a duel and is offered the imperial throne, but walks away in disgust with his beloved Lucilla (Sophia Loren). As they leave together, we hear the prefect of the praetorian guard auctioning off the vacant position.[15] Throughout, Lucilla and Livius have been obliged to put their love in second place to their public duty, living out the legacy of Lucilla's father, Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic (and stoic) emperor. But now the public world has proven itself to be hopelessly corrupt and corrupting. Romance can at last flourish unimpeded by its demands. At the end of *Quo Vadis*, the newly converted Marcus Vinicius has deposed Nero and watched the legions of Galba enter Rome in the scene referred to above; he then leaves Rome in a cart with wife and child. If there is a future, it lies with the progressive spread of a Christianity identified with family values and not with a reformed center of power: the idealized communities of the rebel slaves in *Spartacus* and the barbarian settlers in *Fall* are both presented as big families, and the same is true of the Christians in *The Sign of the Cross*.

Supporting, or perhaps underlying, this turn to the private, is the pervasive fear that once you have killed the monster you may become

him and that the very struggle may assimilate you to your enemy. The moment when Spartacus takes deliberate control of the rebellion he has sparked is a case in point. After the rebellion at Capua, the triumphant gladiators force Roman captives to fight to the death. Spartacus stops the fight with the words, "What are we becoming—Romans?" Earlier in the movie he had shouted at his superiors who were watching his encounter with Varinia through the grill of the cell, "I'm not an animal." Ina Rae Hark (1993.159) takes these two moments as defining the parameters of *Spartacus*'s problematic: "How does one escape animality, the purely material form of existence imposed upon the gladiators that constructed their masculinity in terms of bodily force and aggressive penetration, without becoming Roman, transcending materiality only by entrance into a system of desire and signification propped up by the objectification and oppression of the Other?" The problem, according to Hark, is not resolved, and it is perhaps symptomatic of this problem that *Spartacus* is the only toga movie where there is a suggestion of unresolved tension between the public and the private: the last scene produces a poignant splitting of the nuclear family, with the father hanging on the cross while mother and son drive away from Rome in a cart with the cowardly *lanista* Lentulus Batiatus, hardly a promising candidate for surrogate father. Varinia holds up Spartacus's son to the crucified father and tells him that he was born free. But Batiatus hurries her away from the cross before she gives away her identity to the watching soldiers.

Romance

The typical romance of the toga movie was one of the legacies of Victorian toga literature, lovingly parodied by Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* (itself filmed in 1952 with toga stars Victor Mature and Jean Simmons). The plot line of the romance has the Roman soldier falling in love with the Christian girl and abandoning his loyalty to the Roman state under her influence. *The Sign of the Cross* and *Quo Vadis*, based on a hugely popular Victorian play and novel respectively, both conform to this type. The casting of the lovers bears an interesting relation to the Old World versus New World agenda of the Romans-and-Christians plot, betraying something of the cultural anxiety of the newer culture in relation to the old. The romance is usually cast against the grain: the Roman soldier who will convert is played by an American and the Christian beauty who will convert him by an English, or English-sounding, actress. This model works for the archetypal Romans-and-Christians movies *The Sign of the Cross* (Fredric March and Elissa Landi) and *Quo Vadis* (Robert Taylor and

Deborah Kerr). Where there is no conversion, for instance in *Spartacus* (both of the lovers are slaves), the woman is still English (Jean Simmons) and the man American (Kirk Douglas). If the Old World Romans are not men enough, the virile New World hero has some rough edges that the dignity and poise of the heroine will polish. When Spartacus cries out against his oppressors that he is not an animal, Varinia (Jean Simmons), the woman who has been allotted to him by the owner of the gladiatorial school, adds, "Neither am I."

The narrative trajectory of the earlier toga movies links the hero's conversion with his preparation for marriage. Both *Quo Vadis* and *The Sign of the Cross* have their heroes make their first entries as reckless charioteers, but end with thoroughly domesticated men who have rejected the advances of the seductive, and married, empress Poppaea. The Gallio of Richard Burton in *The Robe* is clearly something of a cad when he enters the forum at the beginning of the movie, but he finally walks down the aisle with Jean Simmons to his martyrdom. At the beginning of *Quo Vadis*, Marcus Vinicius, returning from the wars, drives his chariot wildly into Rome, upsetting all in his way. His initial approaches to the Christian Lygia, whom he takes at first for a slave, are marked by a similar brutishness. In the final scene, he is leaving Rome on a very sedate cart with Lygia and a Christian boy at his side and a slave bringing up the rear. From the bachelor sports car to the family station wagon![16] Clearly, in the early fifties, there are contemporary resonances in the theme of the rough-edged soldier returning from the wars and encountering a self-possessed woman who demands the domestication of his martial instincts.[17] The hypermasculine Roman, cynically sophisticated in 1932 (*Sign*), cruder and more explicitly sexist in the fifties (*Quo*), is gradually tamed by the calm steadfastness and faith of the Christian woman and finds something to believe in. The courtship of the lead couple is a negotiation between the sexes that revolves around the issue of what it is to be a man or a woman.[18]

Accompanying the progress of the hero towards a proper understanding of what it is to be a man in the new, Christian, sense, is the difficult confrontation of a young boy with the demands of manhood in the old sense. Each of these movies features a boy confronted with a standard of manhood that he is unable, or unwilling, to live up to and with conflicting role models or figures of authority. In *Sign*, the boy Stephan is sent on a dangerous mission by the stern elders of the Christian community, who remind him that he must be ready to die for "The Master." Captured by the Romans, Stephan is tortured and succumbs, betraying

the location of the meeting.[19] He is tormented by the fact that he was unable to withstand this test, but when he is eventually faced with martyrdom he is still unwilling to take his place in the arena with his fellows. In the end, he derives the strength to go to his martyrdom from the maternal figure of the well-named Mercia, who has taken over leadership of the Christian community after the sterner old men have been killed. In *Quo Vadis*, the Christian boy, shell-shocked after surviving the fire of Rome, is told by Marcus to straighten up, "A man must be a soldier." "I don't want to be a soldier," he whines when Marcus is out of earshot, and leaves Rome in the company of the gentle Peter. But he will leave Rome a second time, as a member of the nuclear family headed by the converted, and domesticated, Marcus.[20]

Rome is the locus of manhood gone haywire, polarized between the cruel, but effete and effeminate emperor and a ruthlessly macho military (Nero and Tigellinus in *The Sign of the Cross*, for instance). The conversion of the lead Roman involves finding a masculinity that will avoid both of these extremes, while reassuring us that the ability to turn the other cheek is just that, an ability and not a necessity. One of the problems that the genre most inventively negotiates is the reconciliation of a "turn the other cheek" pacifism with epic heroism. The Christian Demetrius (*Demetrius and the Gladiators*), who promises to make a sorry gladiator given his refusal to fight, has a convenient temporary loss of faith during which he dispatches an impressive array of his fellows (and makes love to Susan Hayward's Messalina) before returning to the straight and narrow. He retires from the court scene with his girl, leaving Messalina and Claudius reconciled and the institution of marriage triumphant.[21]

Men: Friends and Enemies

In *Spartacus*, the conversion of Spartacus himself from solitary animal to domesticated family man is effected as much by his love for Antoninus (Tony Curtis), "singer of songs," as by his romance with Varinia; from *The Robe* (1953) onwards, the heterosexual romance fades beside the more intense relations between men. In these movies, moreover, it is the male, not the female body that is most prominently on display. Here again, the toga film deviates from its Victorian origins, since Victorian paintings of life in ancient Rome availed themselves of every opportunity to represent female flesh. But where Victorian bath scenes, for instance, feature naked women, the bath scenes of the toga movie are populated by well-oiled male bodies.[22]

The Sign of the Cross and, more modestly, *Quo Vadis* point back to Victorian painting in making a semi-naked woman the centerpiece of the sadistic spectacle of the arena. In later movies, it is scantily clad men who will be featured in scenes of physical torment and humiliation. One of the most striking of these is the scene in *Spartacus* where Kirk Douglas stands before his fellow gladiators, clad in an ancient version of bathing trunks, while the trainer, Marcellus, paints on his naked torso the target areas for the kill, the slow kill, and the maim. The scene is, first of all, a good example of the way this movie recycles episodes from the New Testament: Pilate's exhibition of the pathetic Jesus to the bloodthirsty crowd is here given a new twist. *Ecce homo*, in the form of Hollywood beefcake, becomes problematic for the modern male viewer, who might read the "homo" as English, not Latin. In the toga movie, the male body is spectacularized for an implicitly male audience; it is not only a body with which the male viewer identifies, but also the one that is presented as an object for his gaze, giving rise to an "unquiet pleasure."[23] The male look at the male body must be motivated in such a way that its erotic component is repressed, hence the sadism and violence connected with many of the scenes in which the male body is displayed. The ambivalence attending the subjection of male bodies to the gaze in the Hollywood movie is emblematized by the mixture of caressing adornment and murderous hatred in Marcellus's action. Kirk Douglas's stance expresses a perfect balance between proud self-display and humiliating exposure.[24] In this scene, the fictional audience is male: the other gladiators. Later in the same movie, the display of male bodies is safely corralled into a heterosexual context when one of the Roman ladies who is to be regaled with a private gladiatorial combat asks that the combatants be clothed only as much as decency demands. In *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, the heterosexual gaze is introduced through the figure of Messalina, who takes an unhealthy interest in gladiatorial combat and gladiators. The perverse pleasures of the aristocratic female spectator, a theme that dates back to Juvenal (6.103–13), feature prominently in Victorian toga literature and art.[25] In the Hollywood toga movie, the stereotype of the lascivious female spectator helps to reassure the anxious male viewer that the eroticism of the male body so abundantly on display is for the gaze of women.[26]

Recently the movie *The Celluloid Closet*, which examines Hollywood's treatment of gay and lesbian themes, revived an old controversy about *Ben-Hur*. In it, Gore Vidal repeats his claim that he persuaded William Wyler to instruct Stephen Boyd (Messala) to play the reunion of the boyhood friends as if they had had an earlier sexual relationship that Mes-

sala was eager to reinstate but which his friend now repudiated.[27] If you look at that scene, you will indeed see, as Vidal claims, that Boyd looks "like a man starving." But Wyler claims that he can't remember any such conversation and Charlton Heston (who, according to Vidal, was left out of the loop) is sung. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is interesting that denial is built into the scene itself when the two friends rehearse their boyhood motto, "Down Eros, up Mars."

In *Ben-Hur*, the romance between Ben-Hur and Esther takes second place to the relationship between the two principal men. Where the novel makes much of Ben-Hur's wavering between the good woman (Esther) and the bad woman (the Egyptian Iras), the movie reduces the love story drastically, eliminating Iras, to focus on Ben-Hur's relations with a series of men (Messala, Arrius, Sheik Ilderim, Balthasar). This reorientation is typical of the toga movie after *Quo Vadis*; not only is the male body put on display more than the female, but the most intense scenes, both physically and emotionally, tend to transpire between men.

Is there any relation between this homoeroticism and that of the ancient culture that is supposedly being represented? Gore Vidal reasoned that the Jewish Ben-Hur repudiated as an abomination the sexual relationship that the Roman Messala, with his very different sexual mores, was eager to reinstate. The bisexuality of the ancient, classical male was something of which much of the audience of these movies would have been, however vaguely, aware. But Hollywood is notably shy about recognizing this aspect of ancient culture explicitly. In the 1932 *The Sign of the Cross*, Nero's throne is flanked by Claudette Colbert's Poppaea and a naked, epicene youth, posing languidly, rather like Michelangelo's Adam, on the ground (illustrated in Wyke 1997b.138). But it is not until *Spartacus* (1960) that we get any explicit reference to ancient bisexuality in the famous, and censored, "oysters and snails" scene, restored for the 1991 re-release. There Crassus not only propositions Antoninus, but also makes the case that bisexuality is purely a matter of taste and morally indifferent.

For the most part in these movies, homoeroticism is there but not there. The overture of *Ben-Hur*, for instance, is played over a close-up of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, in which a languid, recumbent Adam lifts an arm towards God, flying in from the wings and reaching to touch Adam's finger. This Christianized version of a story from the Old Testament, painted in the style of classical antiquity, is certainly a good choice for a movie based on Lew Wallace's "Tale of the Christ" that follows the story of a Judaean prince and his struggle with Rome. But imagining the Creation as the coming together of two semi-nude male

figures also provides a high-cultural gloss to Hollywood beefcake, as well as to the movie's foregrounding of quasi-erotic relations between men. The fingers of Adam and God are about to touch, but, in this painting, they will always remain frustratingly separated, and in the close-up of the opening shot, it is the fact that they are not touching that is emphasized. Much of the drama of the movie is generated by this gap, beginning with the reunion of the two boyhood friends whose love is now poisoned by the divisions of empire. Ben-Hur, magnificently realized by Charlton Heston (whose face seems to have been chiseled out of granite), is repeatedly shaken by tremors of violent frustration: he cannot embrace, or even reveal himself to his mother and sister when they become lepers; he must repress the rage that breaks out when Quintus Arrius lashes him in the galleys; he cannot kill the treacherous Messala when he has him in his power. The Michelangelo painting is an extraordinarily economical condensation of many of the movie's themes. I will come back to some of its other resonances later, but, for the moment, I would like to suggest that its homoerotic tinge injects the intensity and pathos of a (socially) impossible love into this image of frustrated touching.

In *Ben-Hur*, the Roman world tears the boyhood friends apart and separates the hero from his family, but it is the protagonist's relationships with Messala and with Quintus Arrius, the commander of the galley in which he rows, that explore most intensely the paradoxical emotions generated by the cruel realities of the Roman world. In movies after *Quo Vadis*, the conversion romance of Victorian toga literature is displaced as a focus of the clash between worlds and replaced by problematic relations between men. Already in *The Robe* (1953), the romance between Gallio and Diana is shadowed by the troubled relationship between Gallio and his slave, Demetrius (Victor Mature). The movie starts with a slave auction at which Gallio intends to buy a voluptuous pair of female twins, but ends up with a man (the "voluptuous" Mature),[28] for whom he pays twice the price. Although the relationship between Gallio and Diana spans the movie, transforming the womanizing Gallio into the husband who walks down the aisle to martyrdom and "the kingdom" with Diana at his side, it is Demetrius who converts him to Christianity, and it is the relationship between master and slave that encloses the real heart of the drama. Gallio first encounters Demetrius when the latter tries to run away at the slave market; Gallio knocks him down, but then proceeds to buy him (recklessly outbidding Caligula) and to display his trust by telling Demetrius to make his own way to his new master's house and report for duty. When Gallio is sent to Palestine (a "pesthole") by Caligula,

Gallio asks Demetrius to be less formal with him: they're both going to need friends where they are going. Demetrius replies sullenly that you can't buy a friend. But after Demetrius has run away, been tracked down by Gallio, converted his erstwhile master to Christianity, and finally been rescued by Gallio from Caligula's torture chamber, the two say farewell, exchanging the words "Goodbye, *friend*." This trajectory from slave and master to friends pivots on the scene in which Demetrius denounces Gallio and the Romans after his master has presided over the crucifixion of Jesus. The scene takes place in the driving rain, with Demetrius, face contorted with emotion, weeping as he rails against his master.[29] In later toga movies, such scenes of deep emotion and pain between men, scenes whose intensity expresses a mixture of love and hate, are common. Rome sets men against each other: as competitors, as enemies, or as master and slave. But the intervention of Rome in what is perceived to be the natural brotherhood of men only intensifies the emotional world of these relationships, so that the physicality through which enmity is expressed comes to express also the love that revolts against that enmity.

In the final scene between Ben-Hur and Messala, even more emotionally intense than the first, thwarted love has become thwarted hatred. Ben-Hur has defeated Messala in the chariot race and Messala, trampled by horses, is lying in the surgery where the doctor insists that they must amputate his leg immediately if he is to be saved. Messala, convinced that Ben-Hur will come to see him, refuses. He will not meet his enemy with his body less than whole. The doctor protests. "He will come," Messala replies. And, sure enough, Ben-Hur keeps his appointment. Messala pulls himself up by the straps above his bed, and, in a voice interrupted by spasms of pain, tells his enemy that his mother and sister (whom Messala had imprisoned) are not dead, as he believes, but lepers; "It goes on, Judah . . . the race is not over." This time it is Ben-Hur who is racked by a spasm of pain; the scene is dominated by the heavy breathing and groans of the two tormented, sweating, and scantily clad men. Their final reunion is a tortured consummation of what is implied in their first.

In *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, Stephen Boyd (Messala in *Ben-Hur*) returns as Livius to play out a similar love/hate relationship with Commodus (Christopher Plummer). The two friends are reunited at the beginning of the movie under the shadow of Marcus Aurelius's death, when Commodus arrives from Rome to visit the border fortress where Livius has been serving. They drink together, twining their arms in an echo of the toast of Ben-Hur and Messala, and then collapse drunkenly on each other. But their friendship is threatened by reasons of state, for Marcus

has bypassed his son in favor of Livius, whom he wants to succeed him. The historical record is saved by Commodus's henchmen who murder Marcus and ensure that Commodus ascends to the throne.[30] The two erstwhile friends coexist uneasily for a while, but Commodus's excesses eventually lead to Livius's rebellion and a final showdown between the two, staged as a gladiatorial duel. When Livius stabs Commodus with a spear, Commodus collapses forward onto Livius and embraces him as he slowly sinks to the ground and dies, a reminiscence of their drunken collapse at the beginning of the movie.

Earlier in the same movie, Timonides (James Mason) is sent by Livius to talk to Ballomar, the captured German chief, whom Livius hopes to win over to friendly relations with Rome. Timonides finds himself alone with the German prisoners, who overpower him; Ballomar then tortures Timonides to test the power of the Roman gods. Applying a torch to some part of Timonides' body below the screen (and belt), Ballomar tells him that he only has to "touch Wotan"—a wooden pole representing the god—to stop the torture. Should he cry out and summon the Roman guards, the Germans will have the privilege of dying in battle; if he endures the ordeal, the Roman gods are stronger; if not, Wotan wins. Timonides does touch Wotan, but he does not cry out. Ballomar is so impressed that he knocks Wotan over and burns him. From then on the two become fast friends. This is another intense, physical scene between men played with the two principals caught in tight focus: Timonides seething with barely repressed pain while Ballomar applies the torch and scrutinizes his reactions closely. In the intimate agony of this scene, enmity turns into friendship, a friendship that grows out of and against the divisions imposed by the Roman empire. One might compare the extended scene in *Ben-Hur* where Arrius tests out his new crew, keeping a keen eye on Ben-Hur, as the *hortator* takes the rowers gradually up to ramming speed, after which they all collapse limply into a panting, sweating mass. Again, this is the beginning of a relationship between oppressed and oppressor that will lead to Arrius's adoption of Ben-Hur as his son.

From one perspective, the narratives of these friendships might be seen to serve a sexual agenda, finding an acceptable expression, an alibi, for a homoeroticism necessarily (but uncomfortably) implicated in the mainstream male audience's relation to these heroes. But from another perspective, the sexualization of these scenes, their hinting at an impossible love that could not be consummated in its proper mode (at least on the screen), fulfills a narrative purpose, insofar as the very forbid-

denness of the love expresses the frustrated yearning of Rome's subjects to transcend the competition and enmity through which they serve its purposes. The narrative uses the mainstream male audience's conflicted relations to homoeroticism for its own agenda. Such scenes, then, dramatize the impact of the cruel demands of the "Roman" world, setting men against or in competition with each other, but the eroticization allows them to express at the same time the participants' frustrated need to transcend this imposed enmity.

Society and Competition

There are two contrasted spectacles of manhood in the toga movie: the armor-clad legions tramping in invulnerable synchrony across the screen and the single, semi-naked man raised on a cross to die or displayed in an *ecce homo*. The former reaches its apogee in the *testudo* that, in the 1963 *Cleopatra*, emerges from the palace to destroy the enemy's siege weapons, an impenetrable column of shields moving relentlessly through the besiegers under the satisfied eye of Caesar (cf. Theweleit 1989.153–59 on "The Troop as Totality-Machine"). The latter appears in several movies, but it also has its secular variants: Ben-Hur in the galleys, clad in a loincloth, and picked out by the stern eye of Arrius; Spartacus standing in front of his fellow trainees in the gladiatorial school while Marcellus paints on his naked torso the target areas, and so on. On the one hand, the anonymous mass and, on the other, the vulnerable hero—both have their attractions and disadvantages. Everyone wants to be noticed, of course, but not if it means being exposed. Nobody wants to be swallowed up in the mass, but it is not always an advantage to be singled out: the only legionary who speaks up from the ranks is flogged at the orders of *Quo Vadis*'s Marcus Vinicius, and Ben-Hur similarly comes under the lash of Quintus Arrius when he draws the latter's attention among the galley slaves.

Although, for the most part, they are cast as the enemy, as a spectacle, the legions provide a reassuring image of the invulnerable male body to compensate for the exposed, vulnerable body of the oppressed hero. Again, the dualistic structure of the toga movie should not be seen simply as an "us and them" antagonism, it is also a structure of complementarity. But if, along one axis, the invulnerable "body" of the legion is contrasted with the vulnerable body that is singled out, along another axis, the society of the legion is contrasted with the society of the gladiatorial school. The gladiatorial school is a group of *individuals*, with different specialties, armor, and weapons, but the individuality of these

gladiators is inseparably involved in the murderous competitiveness that is forced on them. The fascination of these modern movies with the Roman gladiatorial school is explained by the fact that it provides a hellish vision of the technologized, competitive society: every skill is individually isolated and practiced with the help of some contraption, every comrade in suffering is a potential threat to your life.[11] When Spartacus, newly arrived at the school, tries to make friends with Draba, the latter responds to his advances with the warning that they may meet in the arena, so it is not advisable for them to know too much about each other. As it turns out, it is the refusal of Draba to kill the defeated Spartacus when performing for Crassus and his entourage and his assault on the spectators that spark the revolt in the gladiatorial barracks.[12] At the end of the movie, when the revolt has failed, this scene is recalled; the rebels have been crucified and only Spartacus and Antoninus remain, saved for the next day when they will be forced to fight to the death. But Crassus, frustrated in his attempt to woo Spartacus's wife Varinia, angrily decides to have them fight there and then before him. The winner will be crucified. He will test this famous slave brotherhood. So the two friends find themselves caught in a double bind: if they love each other they will have to provide Crassus with the spectacle he desires, and the more they love each other the better they will fight. On the other hand, for Crassus, the better the two friends fight the more their brotherhood is confirmed. Spartacus wins, of course, and he kills Antoninus, holding him in his arms, with a sword thrust. As Antoninus dies he says, "I love you, Spartacus, as I loved my father." Spartacus replies, "I love you Antoninus, like the son I shall never see, now go to sleep." This scene makes explicit the connection between the fact that Rome sets men against each other and the quasi-erotic fusion of violence and tenderness that characterizes relations between men in this context.

A similar mixture of violence and tenderness features in *Barabbas*, where the initial relationship between the skeptical Barabbas and the Christian Rachela, who is stoned early in the movie, is replaced by that between Barabbas (a rough-edged Anthony Quinn) and his fellow slave, the Christian Sahak (a delicate Vittorio Gassman). They work together in the mines and in the fields, but eventually find their way to Rome as gladiators. On arrival at the training camp, Barabbas tells his friend that this is a world he can understand, but Sahak refuses to fight and declares himself a Christian; his fellow gladiators are compelled to execute him, Saint Sebastian style, using spears instead of arrows. When they lose their nerve and miss their aim, the sadistic trainer Torvald (Jack Palance)

finishes him off. Barabbas rescues the body of the dead Sahak, cradling it as in a *Pietà*, and brings it to the Christians in the catacombs.

A Problem of Fathers

Speaking of the broad range of film genres that feature men in conflict, Ina Rae Hark (1993.152) says: "Males played by movie stars become spectacularized, these narratives assert, only because the rightful exercise of masculine power has been perverted by unmanly tyrants . . . Thus, the usurpers often display characteristics not marked as signifiers of masculinity in the codes of male film performance at the time. They may, for instance, be effete, overweight, short, foreign-accented, or disabled." One thinks here of the infantile, effete Neros of Laughton (*Sign*) and Ustinov (*Quo Vadis*); of the aging and feeble Tiberius of *Ben-Hur*, of the shrill, spindly Caligula of *The Robe* and *Demetrius*, of Christopher Plummer's giggly Commodus in *Fall*. In the toga movie, there is an ongoing problem with male authority that expresses itself clearly in the sphere of fatherhood, real or symbolic. It is part of the difficulty of the Roman world the men must negotiate that fathers (and father figures) are absent, cruel, or otherwise problematic. Spartacus was born, we are told in the opening voice-over, to a slave mother, "increasing his master's wealth." We are not told anything about his father, but are probably to assume that he was the owner who sold him into slavery in the mines, where he "lived out his youth and young manhood." In these movies, the stern Roman *paterfamilias*, capable of executing his sons for reasons of state, is merged with God the Father, who handed over his Son to mortality and crucifixion. The image of Michelangelo's *Creation* that presides over the beginning of *Ben-Hur* is, of course, an image of fatherhood, but one that applies to the movie's narrative in a paradoxical way. In the languid Adam, we may see the exhausted Ben-Hur, brutalized by Roman justice. But it is Jesus the son who lifts up his suffering coeval, bringing Ben-Hur water when he collapses on his way to the galleys, while the Roman Arrius, who will become his adoptive father, lashes him and pushes him to his limits at the oars on their first encounter. True, Arrius gives him the opportunity to escape when he unshackles him before the battle, but, as a result, it is Ben-Hur who rescues Arrius and not vice versa. In this "Tale of the Christ" (Lew Wallace's subtitle), it is appropriate to remember that Jesus' own father gave up his son to be crucified. Ironically, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, one of the non-Christian movies, is the only one to allude to Jesus' accusation that his father has forsaken him (Matthew 27:46). When Marcus Aurelius lies dead, having passed

over Commodus and appointed Livius to succeed him, Commodus asks his father why he denied him. Earlier, the Stoic Marcus said of Commodus, "I, too, love Commodus, but that is just a feeling, a personal feeling." As it turns out, Commodus is really the son of a gladiator, his friend, sparring partner, and constant companion (Anthony Quayle); when Commodus discovers his parentage, and his father tries to embrace him, as his official father had not, Commodus stabs him.

In the world of the toga movie, Rome is a stern father under whose eye "brothers" are set against each other but thereby brought together in a bond that expresses itself as an impossible and paradoxical love. Messala, seeking to solicit Ben-Hur's help in controlling the province of Judaea, tells him that the emperor is watching them. Messala's rise in the Roman world, he promises, will benefit his friend; he then asks for the names of Jewish dissidents. But the watching eye of the emperor will set the friends against each other when Ben-Hur refuses to cooperate. At one point, Messala remarks wryly that the emperor loves his recalcitrant province. When Ben-Hur replies that this love is not reciprocated, Messala asks facetiously, "Is there anything sadder than unrequited love?" It is the eye of the imperial father that turns the relationship between the two friends into one of unrequited love.

In the 1932 *Sign*, the stern Christian elders are killed off well before the end of the movie, and the male voice of fire-and-brimstone Christianity is silenced by the maternal Mercia, who takes over the leadership of the Christians when the moment of truth arrives. But there is no equivalent maternal authority in the movies of the fifties and early sixties, nor are there any father figures as unproblematic as the kindly but courageous Peter and Aulus Plautius of *Quo Vadis* after that movie. In some ways, the heroes of the later toga movies inhabit the same world as the tormented youths played by James Dean, who clearly have a problem with fathers. But Rome is not a family, and these men are anything but alienated. Rome is the name for the unrequited desire for an authority that would restore the public world to these anachronistic men.

The postwar years were a time of crisis for American masculinity. Returning from the all-male world of a successfully waged, heroic war, the soldier settling into civilian life had to negotiate his own domestication as well as a new understanding of gender relations in the wake of women's entry into the workplace on the home front. Family life was taking on new forms in the mushrooming suburbs, and the workplace itself was changing as the white-collar revolution brought new forms of alienation, so memorably described by C. Wright Mills (1953.xvi–xvii):

> The salaried employee does not make anything, although he may handle much that he greatly desires but cannot have . . . In his work he often clashes with customer and superior, and must always be the standardized loser: he must smile and be personable, standing behind the counter or waiting in the outer office. In many strata of white collar employment, such traits as courtesy, helpfulness and kindness, once intimate, are now part of the impersonal means of livelihood. Self-alienation is thus an accompaniment of his alienated labor.

The struggle in these movies to accommodate traditional masculine roles to a changing world reflects this self-alienation.

By the end of the period covered by these movies, a new generation that had not lived through the Depression or the war was making itself felt. What would the sons make of the world their fathers had bequeathed them? Both *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) seem to pose this question through their bipartite structure in which the first part is dominated by great men (Julius Caesar, Marcus Aurelius) whose sons, real or symbolic (Mark Antony, Livius, Commodus), must struggle to live up to their example in the second part. The appropriately named *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was the last of the Hollywood toga epics before *Gladiator*: for the new generation, the world-historical struggles of Christianity and Rome were no longer viable dress with which to clothe their concerns. For that, it took a very different kind of movie, one that was actually inspired by a Roman literary work, *Fellini Satyricon* (1970).

Notes

1. *Quo Vadis* and *Spartacus* provide the best examples of this kind of opening.

2. Vance 1989.1–67 focuses on nineteenth-century American attitudes to Rome, and Douglas Williams 1997 gives an overview that continues through the twentieth century.

3. During the war, Paramount redistributed the 1932 *The Sign of the Cross* with a new prologue in which parallels were drawn between Nero and Hitler (Wyke 1994.19–20).

4. Mayer 1994.12 makes the same point about the toga dramas at the end of the nineteenth century.

5. In *The Sign of the Cross*, DeMille makes a joke of the analogy between Romans attending gladiatorial games and contemporary Americans going out to the movies.

6. Wood 1975.173: "The ancient world of epics was a huge, multi-faceted metaphor for Hollywood itself, because . . . these movies are always *about* the creation of such a world in a movie, about Hollywood's capacity to duplicate old splendors." For a more generous analysis of this aspect of the epic movie, see the interesting remarks on the phenomenology of history in the Hollywood epic in Sobchack 1990.27–40.

7. Reproduced in Liversidge and Edwards 1996.62, 55.

8. See Martin Winkler 1995.140, who quotes the director Mann as saying that he didn't want to make another movie giving the impression that the Christian movement was the only thing the Roman empire cared about. Winkler also remarks (144) on the unorthodoxy of the movie's opening, with its wintry landscape dominated by a forest and a border fortress. It is not until the movie is into its second quarter that we see the eternal city and the Italian sun.

9. Douglas Williams 1997.606–07 cites speeches of Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy that seem to be echoed in this speech.

10. Douglas Williams 1997.390 cites comparisons between early Christians and Communists in the press of the fifties.

11. Babington and Evans 1993.192–93 have a good analysis of Petronius along these lines.

12. As the opening voice-over of *Quo Vadis* makes clear: "The individual is at the mercy of the state . . . There is no escape from the whip and the sword. That any power on earth can shake the foundations of this pyramid of power and corruption, human misery and slavery, seems inconceivable."

13. Not even in the movie that takes us to the latest point in the history of Rome, the Attila biopic *Sign of the Pagan*. But, by now, the empire is Christian (which is what saves it).

14. Martin Winkler 1995.140 points out that Timonides is seen wearing a Chi-Rho pendant toward the end of the movie, a subtle reminder of the marginal presence of Christianity in the late second century.

15. This scene is modeled on the accession of Didius Julianus after the murder of Pertinax in 193 as recounted by Gibbon 1946.1.83.

16. "The cart is the equivalent of the buckboard in westerns, which, in turn, was equivalent to the family station wagon" (Biskind 1983.257).

17. Biskind 1983.250–78 is a good discussion of "coming home" in movies of the fifties.

18. Vance 1989.26 has some interesting remarks on the history of the conventional ascendancy of Christian or "feminine" over Roman or "masculine" values in historical romances.

19. In Wilson Barrett's hugely popular stage play of 1895, on which the movie is based, the scene of Stephan's torture, and particularly his scream, was a great theatrical coup. Tardy theatergoers would anxiously ask the ushers, "Has he screamed yet?" (Mayer 1994.148).

20. *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) features a father who has earned wealth and status as a gladiator and *lanista*, but whose son rejects his father's brutal ways and hides escaped Christians—with one of whom he is in love. The father, dis-

appointed in his son's lack of martial spirit, finally sees the wisdom of his son's ways, but only on the point of death.

21. The motif goes back to Victorian toga literature: Shaw has a delicious parody of the "turn the other cheek" scene in *Androcles and the Lion* (well done in the movie).

22. For examples of Victorian bath scenes, see the paintings in Liversidge and Edwards 1996.147, 153, 169, 170. It is true that Claudette Colbert (Poppaea in *The Sign of the Cross*) and Elizabeth Taylor (*Cleopatra*) have titillating bath scenes, but the movies in which they feature fall at the extreme ends of the period I am studying.

23. The phrase "unquiet pleasure" comes from an article on the films of Anthony Mann (which include *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and the opening sequences of *Spartacus*) by Paul Willeman in which he notes that Mann obviates any potential homosexual voyeurism by repressing the eroticism of the male look at the male beneath sadism and violence. Steve Neale discusses this article in Cohan and Hark 1993.13–14.

24. There is a reproduction of this scene in Hark 1993.158. Hark 1993.169–70 has an interesting note on the analogy between gladiators and actors, in which she quotes Douglas as saying, "I was probably the only man in Hollywood who's had to strip to get a part."

25. A more relevant ancient parallel for this theme would be the remarkable passage (1096–1101) in the Christian Prudentius's *Contra Orationem Symmachi* describing the reactions of the Vestal Virgins to gladiatorial combat. It concludes (the translation is my own):

> Consurgit ad ictus
> et, quotiens victor ferrum iugulo inserit, illa
> delicias ait esse suas, pectusque iacentis
> virgo modesta iubet converso pollice rumpi,
> ne lateat pars ulla animae vitalibus imis,
> altius impresso dum palpitat ense secutor.
>
> She rises to the blow, and whenever the victor plunges his sword in the neck, she says he is her darling, and the modest maiden bids him puncture the breast of the fallen, her thumb turned down, so that no portion of life remain deep in the entrails while the gladiator quivers as the sword is driven deeper.

For a Victorian version, see "*Habet!*" the painting of Simeon Solomon (1865) showing a box of aristocratic women watching the death of a gladiator, reproduced and discussed in Liversidge and Edwards 1996.128–30. The painting is probably inspired by chapter 20 of J. G. Whyte-Melville's novel *The Gladiators* (1863), whose seventh chapter is titled "*Habet!*" American examples from William Ware's *Zenobia* and Grace Greenwood's travelogue are discussed by Vance 1989.23, 52.

26. See Hunt 1993.72–73. Hunt distinguishes (75) between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" looks at the male body, and goes on to make the point that *Spartacus*, *Ben-Hur*, and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* parallel a "legitimate" emotional relation between men with both an "illegitimate" male relationship and a "legitimate" male/female one.

27. Gore Vidal's account can be found in the book that inspired the movie, Russo 1987.76.

28. Groucho Marx was reputed to have said, apropos *Samson and Delilah*, "I never see films where the man's tits are bigger than the woman's." Babington and Evans 1993, who quote this remark, close their book with an excellent section on Victor Mature in which they discuss the complexities of the spectacle of Mature's manhood and of the audience's identifications.

29. In *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, the sequel to *The Robe*, there is a scene that mirrors this, where Demetrius, who now has lost his faith and plunged into an affair with Messalina, is confronted by Peter, his erstwhile friend and mentor. Demetrius rails in disillusionment against Peter and Christianity, just as he had railed against Gallio and Rome in the previous movie, but, in the end, he returns to the fold and leaves Messalina for Peter.

30. As Martin Winkler 1995.139 points out, the method of Marcus's murder (an apple poisoned on one side and shared with the emperor) is the method by which Marcus is rumored to have murdered Lucius Verus in the *Historia Augusta*.

31. There are scenes in a gladiatorial school in *Spartacus*, *Barabbas*, and *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, and a hilarious parody of these scenes in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966). Babington and Evans 1993.219 refer to the gladiatorial school as "that terrifying microcosm of an ultimately competitive society." Hark 1993.169 is more specific: "*Spartacus* stops just short of overtly comparing the gladiatorial school to a film studio and the spectacularized combatants to actors." It is interesting to compare the gladiatorial school in *Spartacus* to the rather similar phenomenon of the military boot camp, the setting of the first half of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* of 1987. Kubrick took over the direction of *Spartacus* from Anthony Mann when most of the scenes at the gladiatorial school had either already been shot or already prepared by Mann.

32. The relationship between Draba and Spartacus is modeled on the similar relationship between Demetrius and the Nubian king in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*. In the earlier movie, the Nubian, who is to fight the novice and pacifist Demetrius, advises Demetrius to put on a good show in the hopes that a satisfied audience will spare both of their lives. But the audience senses that, in the words of Caligula, "These gladiators are too fond of each other," and they are forced to fight in earnest. In 1954, it is the white Demetrius who wins and persuades the emperor to spare his black competitor's life.

2

The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945

Martin M. Winkler

The importance of the Roman republic for the United States Constitution and for the country's formative years is a matter of general knowledge. By contrast, the popular American perception of Rome as an empire differs considerably from the idealized image of the republic. We may adduce two general reasons for this, one historical, the other religious. The first lies in the fact that, with Julius Caesar, Rome had become a monarchy, a form of government which frequently leads to tyranny, as historians from Tacitus to Gibbon have shown—to mention only the two most widely read historians of ancient Rome. Given the United States' successful emancipation from the British empire, such a view is not surprising. It also fits in with the second reason, one prevalent not only in the United States. This is the part the Romans played in the condemnation and death of Jesus. Since Pontius Pilate, the local administrator of imperial Roman government, allowed the crucifixion to take place and his soldiers carried it out, Romans are "bad guys" in the fiction and popular culture of Christian societies almost by necessity.

Military power and excessive luxury have been regarded as the two major factors contributing to Rome's fall since Montesquieu published his "Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline" in 1734. His perspective echoes that of the ancient Romans themselves, primarily that of Sallust. The moralizing historian, who was to influence Tacitus's negative perspective on the imperial system, attributes Rome's decline to luxury and the hunger for power (*luxuria* and *lubido dominandi*). Late republican and especially imperial Rome has thus come to be an almost archetypal—as well as stereotypical—society characterized by might and vice. The empire's might is embodied

in the megalomaniacal tyranny of its rulers (what Germans used to call *Caesarenwahn*), in its military force, and in the exploitation of slaves, while luxury, lurid sex, gladiatorial games, and the persecution of Christians are all seen as proof of Rome's moral decline and foreshadow its fall.[1] That much of this perspective is unhistorical hardly needs emphasizing.[2]

In the United States, the negative view of imperial Rome has received its widest dissemination in the cinema, with the honorable exception of one of Hollywood's last grand-scale Roman epics, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). What makes these films worthy of our attention, even when they contain predictable plotlines, anachronisms, and any number of historical inaccuracies, is their modern overtones. References to contemporary or recent events which underlie American films set in ancient Rome indicate that the cinema has played a more important part in the reception of Rome in the twentieth century than viewers —or, for that matter, scholars—have generally realized (cf. Winkler 1995:137–38, Wyke 1997b:1–33). For this reason, the films deserve serious consideration. They reveal, on the one hand, the continuing presence of classical antiquity in modern American culture and, on the other, one of the most influential ways in which both modern history and a popular medium can together color the perception of the past. The visual media have, after all, become many people's primary sources for their "knowledge" of the past.

The following pages trace one important aspect of the popular reception of imperial Rome in American films made after World War II: Rome as an analogue of fascist Germany. In this, I do not mean to deny that post-1945 films also reflect Communism, the Cold War, or McCarthyism. (Some of my comments point to these aspects or may remind readers of them.) Since the silent era, Hollywood has seen the Roman empire as an ancient parallel to modern military or totalitarian empires in general. But after the experiences of World War II, the portrayal of ancient Rome in the films of the 1950s and early 1960s bears closer and more specific resemblances to Hitler's Germany than to Mussolini's Italy or the Soviet Union.

Military Tyranny and Religious Persecution

The fundamental theme of American films set in imperial Rome is that of power inevitably leading to corruption. The standard image of the Roman empire presents a military dictatorship which ruthlessly exterminates all resistance to its dominance and enslaves the conquered.

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