
Uncivil Liberties and Libertines: Empire in Decay

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I.

I'VE BEEN A FILM NUT from the time my parents would park me in a film theatre as their form of baby-sitting. My father invented phone vision, which was an early version of cablevision that allowed us to see newly released movies at home on our round television screen, which looked like an old Bendix washing machine. I wrote one of the earliest books on classics in cinema—and soon after, more books on the topic followed mine.¹ I looked forward to seeing the films described in *Ancient Rome*, many of which I had not seen because I have avoided blood-fest films which invite being described with gore-filled ecstasy. (I have also avoided slasher movies, holocaust movies, and kiddie movies because they disturbed my possibly misguided sensibility.)

The choices of films in Elena's Theodorakopoulos' book are all the work of interesting directors—some better than others, but the quality is, for the most part, high. The writers for all these film scripts are generally outstanding. Good photography also seems to be a given. As we are told in the conclusion, "Whatever the story, spectacle is never far from Rome."

The key to assessing these treatments lies in the interpretation of the portrayal of violence. Are we, the audience, admiring it? Calling for it, as we call for it in films by Quentin Tarentino, beginning with *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), or the series called *Saw*, the seventh version (2010) now in 3-D? Do

Elena Theodorakopoulos, *Ancient Rome at the Cinema: Story and Spectacle in Hollywood and Rome*. Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2010. 199 pages, \$25.00.

we ask whether we moderns have all become Romans rather than Greeks? One remembers that warning in the *Aeneid*, 6.851–53: “Remember Roman, your art is to govern people: rule justly in peace; spare the defeated, but subdue the proud” (*Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento. / Hae tibi erunt artes: pacisque imponere morem, / parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*). The Greeks too had their empire, and their slaves. But they carved statues that breathed life, and wrote immortal poetry to musical accompaniment.

Theodorakopoulos conveys well some of the ideals in these films as well as their condemnation of the excesses that Rome illustrated, particularly in its blood sports. Rome becomes, as Theodorakopoulos claims, “a symbol or metaphor for power itself” (148). Many of the films on Rome deal with whether power is centered in the hands of one, or shared in a Republic. Is the *Pax Romana* a shared peace with equality, or simply total domination, which rarely works for long? Social issues were important: how slaves and occupied countries were treated. Decadence is a sign of corruption, which often titillates the viewer and was included not only in “Hollywood” productions of the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s, but also (here) in Federico Fellini’s *Satyricon* (1969) and Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (1999). If there was no sex and violence in a film about Rome, audiences felt betrayed. Needless to say, the representation of women—typically as either powerful bitches controlling weak men, or whores and slaves for their amusement—did not do much to further the cause of equal rights. As usual, there were a few mother and Mother Mary types (like Miriam, Tirzah, and Esther in *Ben-Hur*, 1959); but if women assumed power, they often fit the Livia, Messalina, Poppaea types, or were wicked, dangerous foreigners, like Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and Tamora, Shakespeare’s fictional queen of the Goths. In my opinion, there should have been more discussion of the representation of women in these chapters.

The chronological arrangement is good, not some theoretical arrangement that names muses, and discusses film as an

afterthought. Theodorakopoulos selects dramas that replicate themes—the good man wronged, for instance, in all but the *Satyricon*. Slaves and the horror of slavery are the main subjects of the first two films: William Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* and Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960). In their own way they also deal with fascism and empire.

In *Ben-Hur*, the theme, in part, is of religious redemption: the new king is a king of the next world, and his rule (coupled with convincing miracles) is that of peace and turning the other cheek. It calls for an end to violence. (Wyler joked that it took a Jew to make a good movie about Christ.)² This has a happy ending, but at the end, Judaea is still occupied by Rome (“Render under Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s,” *Matthew* 22:21). It’s a happy ending for Ben-Hur, but not as much for his country. Some of the same elusive hopefulness still persists for Israel, and Palestine.

The first three films begin with an overture and have intermission music. Theodorakopoulos points out how these should be appreciated, and also how music forms a backdrop to the opening credits, in the case of *Ben-Hur* a map of Judaea, with the phrase *anno domini* over it (alluding to the “lord” at the very beginning of the film).

The musical score for *Ben-Hur* represents probably the peak of Miklós Rózsa’s career. He does not write the soppy music that often accompanies films to underline the action. For instance, he scored the chariot race with just the sounds of horses, chariots, and the mob. Again, after years of searching, when Ben-Hur finally meets with his mother and sister, both stricken by leprosy, there is no “happy” underlying music to tell you what you should be thinking. Rózsa does add organ music for Christ’s appearances, but who’s perfect? I also like the fact that Wyler doesn’t ever show Christ’s face, something he owed to Fred Niblo’s earlier film (1925), *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ*.

Theodorakopoulos points out how the nativity scene seems a bit naïve and rather too simple by comparison with

the rest of the “spectacle” film and our expectations. Wyler certainly delivers on the spectacle, spending a huge amount of money plus time to achieve the elaborate and massive sets that later directors envied. Yet the effects in Niblo’s nativity scene seemed even more elaborate, with his use of the star indicating the place where the divine birth was happening, the costumes of the kings, and the presence of the animals. Theodorakopoulos says, approvingly, of Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* that “the nativity should be a more sublime moment” (34) rather than some technological achievement to awe the audience with effects.

There were also many metaphoric visual allusions to the cross in Wyler’s film, like the crossed spears between Mesala and Ben-Hur at the beginning. Wyler’s crucifixion scene itself was minimal, certainly by comparison with bloody modern versions like Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

The panoramic sweeps and the camera’s point of view revealed Wyler’s art. Seeing the arena from the point of view of the Emperor Tiberius—and Rome’s power—is to see, as Theodorakopoulos says well, that

the triumph is not only about condemning Roman displays of power. It [provides] Wyler with the opportunity to exploit the technology at his disposal in order to create maximal visual pleasure and maximal realism. Thus, the narrative may be asking the viewer to take note of the vertical axis along which the all-seeing, god-like Tiberius is in control, backed by the oversized eagle that supports visually the script’s interpretation of the emperor as a totalitarian leader. (47–48)

Oversized eagles and totalitarian leadership? The Nazis were fond of the eagle as a symbol, perhaps as a throwback to the might of Rome. It was Jupiter’s bird, the mythological king of the Roman gods. Think of Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest Retreat in Berchtesgaden in Germany and the Doppeladler crest, an early symbol of the Byzantine and Holy Roman Empires that looked both east and west. Wyler was on to something.

Becoming Roman was an addictive pleasure, as Esther, Ben-Hur's freed slave, who takes care of his mother and sister when he thinks they are dead, points out when she says, "It's as though you have become Messala." The real miracle at the end is that Christ cures Ben-Hur of his Roman disease/obsession besides curing his mother and sister of their leprosy. He will become a private man, no longer addicted to vengeance or power. He truly becomes a Christian, as a Christian is supposed to be.

Ben-Hur won eleven Academy awards, matched only later by *Titanic* (1997, and in 2012 it went 3-D). Both *Ben-Hur* and *Titanic* were called "the most expensive film ever made" (44). But there is additional commentary in the Collector's Edition of the film by directors who owed much to that 1959 blockbuster, including George Lucas, who learned not only about the use of scale, but also from the chariot race, which in his opinion has never been surpassed. Lucas certainly used what he learned from Wyler's chariot race in *Star Wars* (1977), and later the pod race in *The Phantom Menace* (1999). Ridley Scott likewise paid tribute in his panoramic views in *Gladiator* (2000), as did Julie Taymor in *Titus* (1999). By that time, they could generate effects by computer, and film had entered a new technological period. Yet many modern chases in films are based on that race in *Ben-Hur*. The chariot race certainly is still spectacular today, and there are effects that could not be achieved by real chariots (if they collided on the sides, the horses would collide first and overturn them rather than simply damage the wheels). But the plot of the race—when to advance, when to retreat, and how to handle disasters—is a story in itself and still breathtaking.

Theodorakopoulos says rather coolly at the end of her chapter: "We can conclude that *Ben-Hur* critiques its own spectacularity and shows a nuanced exploitation of the relationship between narrative and spectacle." That's not the first thought I had when I sat at the edge of my seat cheering Ben-Hur on.³ It was gripping and it held the audience. So

while this spectacularity cost fifteen million dollars to shoot, the most expensive film up to this point, it earned over eighty million and saved MGM.

Many writers contributed to the 1959 script, from Gore Vidal (the only true scholar of the ancient Romans, as his 1964 novel, *Julian*, later illustrated), to Sidney Franklin, Karl Tunberg, S. N. Behrman, Maxwell Anderson, Christopher Fry, and others. The writers followed in part the original book *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* by General Lew Wallace (1827–1905), a Union General—in fact, a *hero* who fought for the North in the American Civil War. It is interesting how his book deals with the abuses of slavery. The book became a best seller, followed by a play, though of course, Wallace never lived to see the first hour-long film and the others that followed.

For my taste, Theodorakopoulos could have included more discussion of what occurred behind the scenes. For instance, Vidal inserted a homosexual relationship between Ben-Hur and Messala. Heston objected to the suggestion that his character had any homosexual feelings towards Messala, or Messala for him, yet such a drive certainly would explain the intensity of their hatred. Fry was brought in when Vidal had to leave for other commitments, but they conspired behind the scenes with Boyd as Messala, and they got the performance they wanted. Heston fiercely denied that relationship and took his revenge by thanking only Fry at the end for the script, and not Vidal; Fry had wanted to share credit with Vidal.

There are many changes in the Wyler film from the Niblo one. For instance, the silent version includes a femme fatale as a spy, and an orgy scene; but not the later film. It did detract from the clarity of the story, and gave a different slant on Ben-Hur, his not being as dissolute as a Roman (the earlier film showed him tempted—in a way, more human). The earlier film also showed the tile from Ben-Hur's roof being pushed by Ben-Hur, and not by his daughter; so this makes him less heroic, since Wyler's film shows Tirzah, his sister,

doing it by accident. I think Theodorakopoulos might have benefitted by commenting on how the two versions differed. Myself, I found the ancient crowds more engaging in Niblo's film; for example, when people (including Joseph and Mary, who was about to give birth) were registering for taxation records, children played in the streets, parents grabbed them, people argued; it was not the slick and rather dour Wyler scene which stressed the abuses of empire.

Ben-Hur was from a noble Jewish family, and his best friend was Messala, a Roman and school friend from childhood. Now Messala has to govern Judaea, but because Ben-Hur won't inform on who's plotting against Rome, Messala frames him and sends him to the galleys, his mother and sister to prison. Ben-Hur saves the life of the officer Arrius after a naval battle with pirates (preventing him from suicide, as all good Romans would do following a naval battle they thought they had lost).

Theodorakopoulos brings in a feminist perspective from time to time as she bemoans the patriarchy of Rome: "In saving Arrius from his pagan (and thus misguided) idea of masculinity, which demands his suicide after what he considers his loss of honour, Judah has asserted the validity of a more modern model of masculinity" (45).

Ben-Hur and Arrius are rescued and return to Rome, to celebrate what turns out to be a naval triumph over the pirates. Arrius adopts Ben-Hur as his son. Ben-Hur goes back to Judaea to look for his mother and sister, but is told they are dead. So he agrees to racing a chariot to take vengeance on Messala, who he learns will also take part in this race. Ben-Hur wins; Messalla dies, after informing him that his mother and sister are now lepers. Ben-Hur goes in search of them. At various points in the story, his life intersects with Christ: the registration, the birth in a manger, and Christ offering him water when he is a slave and would probably have died without it. Later, when Ben-Hur returns with his mother and sister in search of a cure, he offers water to Christ as he is walking to his crucifixion. Christ looks at

him, and Ben-Hur loses his desire for vengeance or rebellion against Rome. In a rainstorm, his mother and sister are cured. The three are reunited at the end. The theme of cleansing rain, water to drink, and baptism are obvious.

2.

SPARTACUS IS A DIFFERENT TYPE of film, anti-slavery, with Christian suggestions that were not in the early versions some claim were more intelligent. There is always a problem when the lead actor is also the producer, which Kirk Douglas was through his firm Bryna (after United Artists turned him down because they were making *The Gladiators* with Yul Brynner and Anthony Quinn). Possibly because he had been rejected for the lead role in *Ben-Hur*, Douglas wanted to make another big screen film (like *Vikings*). After he read the Howard Fast novel on which *Spartacus* was based, he was convinced. Universal agreed to distribute it, and the black-listed Dalton Trumbo was the main writer. Douglas fired Anthony Mann, and Stanley Kubrick was the final director chosen.

Kubrick was able to bring in contrasting landscapes, with the city representing the decadent Romans, and the landscapes of the country signifying the taste of freedom that so many slaves were able to experience for the first time. Rome's accents were upper-class British both in this film and in *Ben-Hur* (as so often in other films, e.g., *Clash of the Titans*, 2010, where the gods also had British accents). This was suitable casting to convey empire, particularly an abusive one, given the British record in Ireland, India, Africa, and Australia.

Trumbo also went along with more scenes in Spain to indicate the new communal life of the slave based on family rather than decadence. Theodorakopoulos specifically cites Kubrick's claim that he "was more influenced by Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, than by *Ben-Hur*, or anything by Cecil

B. DeMille" (53). His landscapes added political commentary. She points out the contrast: "the golden, warm colours that suffuse a sequence in the slaves' camp, in complete contrast to the cold marble of the baths where the Romans discuss tactics" (64). Also, when the newly freed slaves are making their Roman captives fight at Capua, Spartacus gets them to stop, asking, "What are we becoming? Romans?" The contrast is clearly drawn, and a bit melodramatic, with the good centered, as it is, on the side of the slaves—although Gracchus as a representative of the Republic shows himself a good man by rescuing Spartacus' wife (as he tried unsuccessfully to rescue the Republic). He commits suicide after he sees the rebellion fail: this Rome has no place for a man with conscience. Still, Theodorakopoulos is a bit moralistic when she comments, "Crassus, decadent and self-indulgent as he is, endowed with a clearly dysfunctional sexuality, as well as a somewhat pathological love of Rome, makes a very good stand-in for an emperor" (75). Does the film show a bit of homophobia in Crassus' bringing up the "oysters and snails" difference, a variation of the moment in one's taste, as he clearly suggests a homosexual relationship to Antoninus (played by Tony Curtis)? During this seduction speech, Antoninus flees when Crassus' back is turned and goes to join Spartacus in his newly organized war.

There's been a long-standing prudishness, particularly in the American environment, which led to a censorship of sex but not of violence; and it is still easier to get an X-rating for sex rather than violence. Julie Taymor spoke of this even in her making of *Titus*, because there was more protest about her "orgy" scenes than her use of violence. The early version of *Ben-Hur* had an orgy scene, which showed women nude, and it was obviously made before the early Hollywood censorship laws, namely when the Motion Picture Production Code took effect in 1930.

Theodorakopoulos convincingly points out something that is symptomatic of many of these films: "The display of the male body is at its core, and that is perhaps the only con-

sistent axis around which the two conflicting models of masculinity revolve” (53). There are many shots of “bodies.” Consistent with this is the theme of “the gaze”: the slaves observed performing what the owners would be titillated to see, namely the sexual act. But their desire is unfulfilled when both Spartacus and Varinia say they “are not animals,” and so refuse to perform for them. On the other hand, Spartacus fixes his gaze on Varinia as she is carrying out her duties, for which he is reprimanded.

Douglas lined up great actors: Peter Ustinov as Batiatus, Laurence Olivier as Crassus, Jean Simmons as Varinia, and Charles Laughton as Gracchus. Douglas also had an over-aged and miscast Tony Curtis play a poet-singer, Antoninus, to satisfy a contract with Universal that he play one more role. (Fulfilling personal favors rarely contributes to the quality of an enterprise.)⁴ Theodorakopoulos and others point out that Ustinov tended to dominate in his scenes and add an element of humor that at times was incongruous with the brutality depicted. Although, perhaps, mad brutality has a comic element—as we see in Brecht’s *Arturo Ui*.

The plot is, historically, relatively accurate (just to compare: Ridley Scott, when queried about a choice he made in a battle scene in *Gladiator*, turned to his critic and asked, “Were you there?”). I like Theodorakopoulos’ choices in her bibliography, but on historical issues she might have included George Macdonald Fraser’s *The Hollywood History of the World*, with excellent sections on Greece and Rome, and how Hollywood tackled history.

Spartacus (109–71 BCE) was a Thracian slave, well described in Plutarch’s *Life of Crassus*, besides Appian’s *Civil Wars*, Sallust, and others. He was able to escape and organize other slaves, even herdsmen and shepherds. After the slaves had won several victories, they paid Cilician pirates to take them to Sicily, but the pirates pocketed the money and betrayed the slaves. Ultimately, the slaves were defeated by Crassus and his legions, as well as Pompey’s legions from Spain. Crassus was brutal to his own troops, and he lined

the Appian Way with crucifixions of approximately 70,000 prisoners.

The film is certainly to be commended on many points. Fast and Trumbo recounted the personal tragedy and emphasized the significance of the slave rebellion; as one prologue cited by Theodorakopoulos put it: “The defeat of Spartacus has become the victory of man” (57). Crassus did not want to make Spartacus a legend, but that was to become Spartacus’ triumph. No one knows how or where the historical Spartacus died. There is a powerful scene when Crassus is trying to find Spartacus, and every slave claims he is Spartacus. I think that is the ultimate message of the film, namely the struggle for freedom and justice as a treasure in the heart of man that should be nourished, and for this the film should be applauded.

Theodorakopoulos rightly points out that “the film’s ultimate lack of coherence is probably largely due to political decisions determining the presentation of Spartacus’ achievements” (52). This was another film with a mixed ending. Should the success or the defeat be emphasized? *Spartacus* also has a happy ending—the “wife” escaping with her child—but in the film, Spartacus himself is ultimately crucified. Yet the idea of the slave fighting back gained the immortality that was lamented in the film: Spartacus became a martyr and symbol for all time.

3.

THEODORAKOPOULOS’ SUBTITLE for her next chapter, on Anthony Mann’s *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), is “The Filmmaker as Historian.” There is also an emotionally satisfying plot. The defeat of corrupt power-mad Rome with the death of Commodus, at the hands of the general Lucius, who helped win victories over the Goths but was sorely abused, satisfied the audience’s need for vengeance.

The film begins in the North as the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, is dying. He has pacified the northern frontiers with

mercy, with Livius' help, and wants to make him his heir because he feels he would carry out his values more than his own son, Commodus, would. Commodus is at first shown to be a good friend to Livius, but it is apparent his father knows his faults. He is not fit to rule, but more interested in extravagant displays and gladiatorial games. There is a plot to kill the emperor, and he is poisoned before he can make his announcement of an heir. Livius cedes to Commodus and finally wins over the north for him. As one country after another in the east defects, Commodus asks Livius for help, which he gives. But he will not be cruel to the defeated as Commodus has ordered him to be. Commodus arranges for Livius to be sentenced to death along with Lucilla, the daughter of Marcus Aurelius, with whom he is in love and who had plotted to assassinate her brother. Commodus challenges Livius to a fight in which he plays every dirty trick in the book, but Livius wins, frees Lucilla, and goes off with her, never to see Rome again: he leaves its rule to be sold to the highest bidder. The narrator concludes: "This was the beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire. A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."

I see how this applies to the America of the time, which not only saw the assassination of a president like Kennedy, but was forced to endure the imperialist crudities of a Lyndon Johnson who was obsessed with escalating America's involvement in the Vietnam War, a war never declared but which cost America many lives and was never won. It seemed in part a monument to Johnson's vanity; in this he resembled Commodus by supporting a bloody spectacle. Nixon, who followed, was not much better, although he did open up China, which may signify America's ultimate fall, given the debt that we now owe her. There are more parallels now with America's undeclared wars and military bases around the world.

Sophia Loren's acting is execrable, and her phony accent didn't help. She played Lucilla, the "philosopher" daughter

of Marcus Aurelius, and sister to Commodus, played by Christopher Plummer, whom (as mentioned) she eventually tries to assassinate. Theodorakopoulos keenly observes that “Mann has Sophia Loren as Lucilla intone an internal monologue as she moves through the crowds. In turning her into a kind of historical prophet the script loses sight of the intimate story between Lucilla and Livius.” This also did not add to the coherence of the film.

Loren cost the movie a million dollars, although Elizabeth Taylor got twice as much for Cleopatra. It was filmed in Franco’s Spain, and earned the locals a lot of money: costumes and sets were homemade, not computer projections. The movie cost twenty million dollars, but never made money. People were tired of “Spectaculars.” Kennedy had just been assassinated, and audiences turned to lighter fare, like *Mary Poppins* (1964). On the basis of his brilliant performance as Commodus, Plummer was probably chosen to star in *The Sound of Music* (1965), a film more acceptable to right-wing elements in Hollywood who were more interested in being amused than educated. Stephen Boyd as Livius, unfortunately, did not provide an adequate balance to Plummer as Commodus; Plummer is a consummate actor.

Nevertheless there are still some wonderful actors in the *Fall*, like Alec Guinness, James Mason, Mel Ferrer, Omar Sharif, and Plummer. Guinness, as the philosopher Marcus Aurelius, probably inspired Obi Wan Kenobi in George Lucas’ *Star Wars* films. The producer Samuel Bronston, born Samuel Bronshtein (1908–1994) in Russia, could have spoken Russian with the famed film composer Dimitri Tiomkin, who also brought a genius to his work. Bronston’s father took him and his siblings out of Russia fearing the excesses that would follow the revolution that had just occurred in 1917. He still shared the values articulated by his Marcus Aurelius, that man not only has to get along with his fellow man, but that if he doesn’t speak to him as an equal, he is not human (this was from Aurelius’ own *Meditations*). Bronston chose writers who had leftist views, and were accordingly

blacklisted by Hollywood. He didn't play by Hollywood's rules, and wouldn't hire predominantly American actors and actresses. His film accordingly won no Academy Awards.

The Fall also had a very good cinematographer, Robert Krasker; the first part of the film begins in dark landscapes and after the intermission it becomes light, rather resembling the blockbuster Roman films with which one was familiar. Nature also played into their hands, and in the first half of the film provided them with rare snowstorms in Northern Spain. Aurelius' funeral featured one of these and a magnificent stately march by Tiomkin, which stopped at one point so that one heard only the torches burning in the snowfall. There was also a muted wailing of mourners, which could be mistaken for the moaning of the wind.

Theodorakopoulos observes that "the human figure never dominates the landscapes and must always appear as a tiny part of a much bigger contest; this is probably the most serious historical point Mann's film makes" (79).

A subtext of this is how Charlton Heston didn't like the script and refused the role of Livius, which then was filled by Boyd, a liberal thinking Irishman, who was Heston's sworn enemy, Messala, in *Ben-Hur* and was defeated by Heston in the chariot race. In this film, as Livius, Boyd wins that race, or at least survives (and enjoys the salary that Heston passed on). By the way, the famous stunt man Yakima Canutt directed the races both in *The Fall* and in *Ben-Hur*.

Many of the character-defining scenes and some intelligent dialogue were cut by Paramount. Still, this is a thinking person's film and may be the reason that it failed at the box office; and Samuel Bronston Productions went bankrupt after making it. Bronston shared the desire for a universal *Pax Romana* as articulated by Marcus Aurelius, who speaks of his vision of "golden centuries of peace" based on compassion and acceptance of all peoples. His view is appropriately called utopian (*ou-topos*, "no place"). But films like these allowed dreams; Bronston, as a refugee, dreamed of "a family of equal nations." (Theodorakopoulos is to be applauded

for not choosing films like Cecil B. DeMille's right-wing extravaganzas.)

Bronston was also a family man with family values, and refused to show the blood and gore in his battles of both earlier and later films. He preferred the authenticity of landscape, costumes, set and craft as dictated historically. One can understand his sympathy for the "foreigner," given his own origins. The resident advising classicist, comparable to Gore Vidal in *Ben-Hur*, was Will Durant, another idealist.

History in *The Fall* certainly predominates over Christianity, which figured so prominently in *Ben-Hur*, and also in *Spartacus* with the cross symbols, the innocent victim crucified, and Spartacus' wife Varinia appearing like the Madonna draped in blue and white, holding Spartacus' child to show him while he is hanging on the cross, a martyr for his cause. In *The Fall*, there is a Christian allusion in Timonides, the Greek Philosopher who advises Marcus Aurelius. At the end, the martyred Timonides is shown wearing a *chirho* pendant, signifying that he is Christian, so he at least believed in an afterlife with salvation, and for the informed audience this helps lessen the tragedy of his brutal murder under Commodus' brutal policies.

An interesting fictional addition is the revelation to Lucilla by Verulus that Commodus was *his* son, something that is abominable to Commodus, who wished not only for Marcus Aurelius' favor (which he realized he didn't have), but also his genetic ancestry, rather than that of a mere gladiator. Of course, that could explain his crude love of blood sports. Commodus wants to ensure that no one who knows these facts can survive, so he kills his father, while claiming, "It's a lie." Theodorakopoulos tells us how Mann's emphasis "lets the viewer see this very intimate drama as part of a larger context in which human beings and their dysfunctional relationships are trapped in the grandeur and luxury of Imperial Rome" (90). She observes that Mann's admirable "detached perspective fails to deliver. In the balance between story and spectacle the viewer is temporarily overwhelmed by specta-

cle since the protagonist who ought to be providing the point of view (as Mann himself asserted) is absent” (92–93).

There still are many good elements, but the ultimate cutting (possibly Paramount’s fault) of what would have helped with understanding the plot and added to the intellectual content, made it more a landscape and spectacle film than Bronston originally had intended.

4.

RIDLEY SCOTT’S *Gladiator* (2000), starring the brilliant actor Russell Crowe as Maximus, covers approximately the same period as *The Fall*, but much more elegantly, with much more technology available, something that can be both a plus and a minus. The able classical consultant was Kathleen Coleman, who has done extensive work on gladiators.

Gladiator begins with the death of Marcus Aurelius and ends with the defeat of Commodus, with the gladiator, Maximus, escaping through death and rejoining his loved ones in the next life. It is more a personal salvation, rather than the social one Spartacus represented (an end to slavery). Nevertheless, there is a suggestion that Rome should return to the Republic, though history does not bear this out. I find this a brilliant film, with Scott showing Maximus’ victory in the north with all the gore that probably was at the heart of it, rather than the restrained presentation that characterized battles in *The Fall*.

The plot starts out with the Romans defeating the Germans at Vindobona. Richard Harris, who is not totally dissimilar in appearance to Alec Guinness, plays Marcus Aurelius. Commodus played by Joaquin Phoenix is not as complex as Christopher Plummer in *The Fall*, and here, this Commodus does not hesitate to murder Marcus Aurelius himself. He feels he was slighted and underestimated by his father, and that Maximus was preferred. Commodus orders Maximus, his wife, and child all to be killed. Maximus escapes, but is captured by slave traders and trained in North

Africa to fight as a gladiator. Juba (Djimon Hounsou, who was the star of *Amistad*), a fellow prisoner, tells Maximus he will rejoin his family in the afterlife.

Maximus, with nothing to live for, becomes a fierce, skilled gladiator. He performs for Commodus in the Coliseum when the emperor restages the Battle of Carthage with skilled Roman fighters, including women, whom he and others feel will easily defeat these North African rookies. In the meantime, Maximus, given the fact that he was an experienced general, teaches his fellow gladiators to work with him in slick military fashion and they defeat their Roman opponents. Commodus forces Maximus to remove his helmet, which he does, and Commodus is forced to spare his life, although he recognizes his mortal enemy. Commodus lusts for popularity. Maximus also refuses to kill another skilled gladiator, Tigris, after having defeated him—Tigris had been undefeated up to that point. Maximus is called “the merciful” and so foils Commodus, who again would like to kill him, but realizes he must cede to the crowd and not make a martyr of Maximus. Maximus plots with his former men as well as the senator Gracchus (played by Derek Jacobi) along with Lucilla, Commodus’ sister. Her vulnerability is a son, and so Commodus, who suspects a plot, threatens her son’s life—and so she betrays Maximus. Commodus arrests him and arranges a fight between them—after first stabbing Maximus in secret. Maximus manages to survive and is able to slit Commodus’ throat. Now the ideals as stated in the last film are realized, as Maximus asks the men to follow what Marcus Aurelius wanted: Gracchus to be reinstated, and the Republic to be reborn with the senate in power, rather than a Rome ruled by an emperor. He also says slaves should be freed. Then we see a fantasy sequence, Maximus rejoining his wife and son in the afterlife. The ending is totally fantastic, but heartwarming by contrast to *The Fall*, which ended in Rome’s hopeless nadir as it was auctioned off to the highest bidder.

This is a brilliant film that shows the genius of Ridley Scott who has brought the Roman blockbuster up to mod-

ern times. It's my favorite of all the films chosen, but then perhaps I'm a sentimentalist, and I also enjoy the science-fiction creativity (lots of CGI, "computer generated imagery") that Scott is known for, besides his endorsement of bravery on the side of justice. He shows the gore and devastation of wars, and yet achieves almost the impossible, namely not pandering to the audience's desire for violence. He has created something for antiquity rather like *The Killing Fields* (1984) or *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), showing the horror of war—or in this case, gratuitous violence to please a mad emperor—and yet saving the picture of the few who had a conscience and made ethical choices. This rightly won many Academy Awards, and the sound track is still one of the best-sellers for motion films: the music was composed by Lisa Gerrard and Hans Zimmer, and one finds allusions in it to the beauty and strangeness of Gustav Holst's music and Wagner's inspirational sequences.

In contrast to the earlier panoramic films, this one features close-ups, which give non-verbal commentary and insight into character. As Theodorakopoulos notes in the slaughter of the Germans, "Through Marcus Aurelius' eyes the spectacle of violence is criticized and the viewer reminded of the correct point of view" (101). Nearly all of the excellent actors live up to their tasks. Crowe's Maximus is shown as a man of peace, and of simple needs, interested only in returning to his family. He prays to figures that he addresses as mother and father, rather reminiscent of the *Lares* and *Penates*, the Roman household gods.

Theodorakopoulos points out that the views of Rome owe much to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a glorification of the Nazis through the Olympics, still a brilliant piece of filmmaking, however execrable the subject. Scott's film advocates a regime that would represent the people rather than laud the demagoguery of a madman.

Maximus never lets others demean him, although many try. He never forgets that he was once a fine soldier and tactician. The emperor is amazed the Romans lost the Punic

War that history says they were supposed to win. Theodorakopoulos observes that they didn't in fact lose but were given the wrong part to play. "Maximus reversed the roles so that we have been watching a legitimate and brave group of Roman soldiers fight and defeat an undisciplined (female, black) group of savages. The grimmest acts of violence (slicing bodies in half, and such like) are perpetrated on the female warriors, while our heroic soldiers manage to save themselves by working effectively under Maximus' command" (119). (She also rightly concludes, "*Gladiator* embraces the entire arsenal of contemporary Hollywood's techniques and scrupulously avoids the theatricality and textual ponderousness associated with its predecessors' cinematic antiquity.") Yet in the end, it is no wonder Maximus wants to leave this world of violence, and enter into another world with the family and peace he has lost, a happy ending after all.

5.

FELLINI'S *Satyricon* (1969) does not follow the chronology of the earlier films because Theodorakopoulos classifies it with *Titus* as "Art Cinema," and like *Titus*, it is based on a classic text, albeit fragmentary. Theodorakopoulos tells us it was hyped in the media as "a highbrow, intellectual, and highly personal engagement with antiquity." I find it a grim reworking of Petronius' intelligent and amusing fragmentary epic adventures of Encolpius, Ascyltus, and Giton, which has the *Cena Trimalchionus* at its core.⁵ Fellini's Catholic upbringing I feel destroyed the humor of the original tale. The endless orgies and scenes of decadence and decay may certainly also convey the Fall of Rome (sometimes literally in the cases where frescoes are destroyed when they collapse on themselves, possibly from earthquake). Nevertheless, the bottom line for me is that Fellini's film was boring and had nothing of the linguistic finesse of the original. Theodorakopoulos' subtitle is "'Farewell to Antiquity' or 'Daily Life in Ancient

Rome’?” It was neither. (Fellini’s *Dolce Vita* (1960) meets *Roma* (1972) here. His fashion show of bishops in *Roma* mirrors some of the grotesqueries of ritual costumes in *Satyricon*.) The photography was exemplary, though, as were all the credentials for an “art film.” But I found the repetitive violence and the graphic effects (hands and heads lopped off, blood spraying all over the place) a bit nauseating and finally, boring. Some parts show the ultimate realism of brothels, and aged, over-made-up prostitutes—but again and again? I don’t think I know any director who can make sexual acts so off-putting (although I confess that’s not the first genre of film I seek out). Few of the actors spoke Italian in the *Satyricon*, so the dubbing was evident, thus increasing the Fellini/Brecht alienating effects.

The story is of two handsome boys, Encolpio and Ascilto, who steal back and forth from each other their young lover Gitone. They survive an earthquake. The scene switches to Eumolpus, a poet-professor, who takes them to Trimalchio, a freedman who offers them a feast where everything is something different from the way it appears. It was Petronius’ vision of his contemporary reality under Nero, in which after being a favored *Magister Ludi* (his “master of games and entertainment”), he is ordered to commit suicide. He does it with grace and aplomb, in a bath, slitting his wrists, freeing slaves, and getting his affairs in order, finally breaking his seal ring so Nero could not use it to frame someone else.

There are several stages to Trimalchio’s banquet, ending in his staged funeral at which he is present (shades of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and Robert Duvall in the film *Get Low*, 2010). The three boys are kidnapped by Lichas, but he is beheaded by Romans, to the great pleasure of his wife. The boys escape to a villa where a nobleman has freed his slaves and committed suicide. There is an adventure with a demi-god Hermaphrodite, whom they kidnap, but who dies in the sun. Again taken prisoner, Encolpio is supposed to slay a Minotaur, but is spared because of his eloquent plea for mercy. Encolpio is forced to copulate for an audience,

but finds he is impotent. He locates a witch who cures him of this, but Ascilto is murdered by the boatman who brought them there. Encolpio intends to leave with Eumolpo for North Africa, but Eumolpo has died. Encolpio tells Eumolpo's heirs they have to eat his corpse in order to get his fortune. During this gruesome feast, Encolpio is invited by the boat captain to set sail, which he welcomes. Then just as they leave the shore, his words are cut off, and we see his face in a Roman fresco, an illustration of the past that Fellini has presented us.

This film is an illustration of the utter baseness of human beings, but now the lower classes in contrast to the upper classes, the nobility of Rome that has entertained us so far. J. Michael Walton said that's why he "finds this film the most plausible picture of what it might have seemed like were we transported back to such an alien and frightful era. A horrid film, but Fellini is the greatest."

The film was a hit at the Venice Film Festival in 1969, popular in Rome and France and actually was selected as the Italian entry for the best Foreign Language film at the 42nd Academy Awards. There's no accounting for taste. Needless to say, Christianity is absent from all this, except in Fellini's psyche, when dreams, mostly nightmares, come to life. The film was advertised as "Rome Before Christ. After Fellini." In spite of my reservations, I am still in awe of Fellini as a genius in filmmaking.

Theodorakopoulos concludes: "This chapter began by recognising that the ideas of spectacle and spectatorship are key catalysts for Fellini's cinematic Rome. . . . In *Satyricon* he indulges this fascination [for the spectacle] while at the same time parodying the Roman historical movies' own pre-occupation with showing off the spectacular decadence of imperial Rome. The rejection of a strong story only adds to the sense that, as in Fellini's next film, *Roma*, in *Satyricon* 'The only unity of Rome is that of the spectacle.'" (144). Since I spent years obsessed with *Satyricon* and its insights into the vicissitudes of life and the constant presence of

death, all seen all through the eyes of Petronius, a consummate master of parody of literary styles, I cannot help thinking that Theodorakopoulos' chapter could have been richer if she shared my obsession.

6.

TITUS I FIND a true masterpiece, directed by the sole female director in this volume, Julie Taymor. Both the cast and directing are superb. This film is faithful in a timeless way to Shakespeare, universalizing the themes to show the events of the twentieth century and the preceding years (Taymor said she was conscious of this as she made it in 1999, at the end of the millennium).

This film traces Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*: Titus (played like the pro he is by Anthony Hopkins) sacrifices the oldest child of a Goth Queen, Tamora (Jessica Lange). She, in turn, exacts her vengeance against him and his family in a brutally sadistic way. The play ends in the deaths of many of the main characters. The emperor Saturninus, Alan Cumming, achieves the perfect mixture of dominating tyrant and vulnerable little boy, so with Lange being older than he is, there are Oedipal suggestions in her control of him. Harry Lennix, as Aaron, Tamora's lover, as black in deeds as he is in color, illustrates the prejudice against race both in Shakespeare and this film. However Lennix, another excellent actor, redeems the character by showing vulnerability in Aaron's love for his baby son.

Seeing the movie again, with the vengeance motif paramount, one thinks of Euripides' Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, avenging her murdered son Polydorus, who had been entrusted to Polymestor, king of Thrace, to keep safe. After the war, however, he murdered Polydorus for his gold. Hecuba lures him to Troy with the promise of more gold, murders his own sons in front of him, then puts out his eyes. Thus not only his final sight but his last visual memory would be of his own sons dying in agony before him.

Taymor intersplices into her film, not only modern political allusions (the fascist entourage of Saturninus, and its flag with the red and black colors of Nazi Germany, in contrast to the light blue and white flag of Bassianus, which might suggest Greece and a gentler approach to politics), but also specifically modern technology (and not just in the Maseratis). The colors also go back to *Ben-Hur*, particularly the chariot race, with red and purple associated with the Romans (authority through bloodshed), black and red with Messala (also a Roman), but white and blue with *Ben-Hur*, colors also associated with the Christian Madonna. We also remember that Ben-Hur's horses were white Arabians, whereas Messala's horses were as black as his thoughts of humiliating Ben-Hur. Here I applaud Theodorakopoulos' chronological arrangement, which shows us who used what from which movie to make mental connections in the eyes of the observant film viewer.

At the time Taymor made this movie, violent video games (like *Resident Evil* or *Killer 7*) featured ways of killing that splattered blood and dismembered victims in particularly graphic ways; they were the equivalent of the sadistic comics Japanese gentlemen would read on the subway on their way to work, or modern Korean nightmare movies, to say nothing of some of American filmic blood fests. Taymor points out in her commentary that the orgy scene gave the film an X-rating until she modified it, but the violence seemed to be perfectly acceptable. This is a strange phenomenon: America prefers making war to love, Violence is US.

Taymor taps into man's need for violence by showing at various points in the film what she called "penny arcade nightmares." However, she does not pander; she reminds all perpetrators of the violence they have committed. These nightmares pile up the victims and have them come back to haunt the killers: first, the twitching torso of Alarbus, Tamora's oldest child, sacrificed by Titus; then, after Titus kills his own son Mutius for being disloyal to him, the penny arcade nightmare shows a lamb sacrificed on an altar; Lavinia's rape and muti-

lation shows her as a doe chased by a tiger; then, the penny arcade comes to life and shows in real time the heads of Titus' sons, falsely accused and executed, being returned to Titus, since he had chopped off his own hand, the price he paid for what he thought would be his sons' lives. Elsie Walker says astutely, "For Taymor, *Titus* is as much about violence as about how we experience violence as entertainment. In a world where the media and movies present a desensitized view of violence, Taymor wishes to reinstall a sense of shock at violence."⁶ These living nightmares are transformed at the end into the grandson Lucius walking off into a surrealistic dawn carrying the black baby that Aaron had fathered with Tamora. Lucius nonverbally asserts a new dawn, based on pity, on forgiveness, which in its own way echoes the *Eumenides*, the final play in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy. *Erinyes*, "The Furies," are through bribery (awards and worship) and force (Athena's vote) transformed into *Eumenides*, "the Kindly Ones."

Theodorakopoulos could be faulted for not going more into the classical allusions, even though this leads to the perhaps unfair conclusion that she is better on films and theory than classics; and that's like critics telling you what topics you left out that were their preferences and had nothing to do with the article or chapter that you wanted to write. Classical allusions, though, can be entertaining as well as illuminating, like Shakespeare's choosing the name of Lavinia, Aeneas' inamorata, but also the one who caused Rome/Italia strife. Then he also had Lavinia as a character refer to the story of Tereus in Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 6.424–674).⁷ Philomela is raped by her sister Procne's husband, Tereus, who then cut out her tongue and imprisoned her in an isolated place. Tereus made the mistake of not also cutting off Philomela's hands (as Tamora's boys do after they rape Lavinia in *Titus*), because she eventually communicated with her sister by weaving a message and having a maid cleverly deliver it.

Shakespeare's Lavinia uses Ovid's myth to show what happened. If the boys who raped her had killed her as their mother suggested, perhaps the truth would never have come to light,

but that would hardly be as effective a Shakespearean tragedy. Ovid's sisters plot their revenge by serving up Tereus' own son to him: his own Thyestean banquet. (All three are turned into birds—see their appearance in Aristophanes' *Birds*, 414 BC.) Titus serving Tamora her children thus had a classical precedent in Ovid, besides the resonance of modern times with Hannibal Lecter (also played by Hopkins), the hero/villain who kills and cooks his victims, or feeds them to pigs.

Lucius, the grandson of Titus who plays childish war games at the beginning of Taymor's film, is suddenly overwhelmed by marching soldiers covered in clay, as if they have emerged from their graves in the past, and resemble the statues of the buried army made to accompany in death the Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang (259 BC–210 BC). Taymor's marching lines were members of the Croatian police force, and Theodorakopoulos reminds us that in *Spartacus*, Kubrick's Roman troops were Spanish and that he likewise highlighted their "robotic and menacing quality" (162). These expressionless soldiers add to the menace of Rome, not only because they keep corrupt Roman authority in power, but also because they seem devoid of humanity.

Young Lucius, at every point, joins in his grandfather's vengeance, but after that is complete, and after Saturninus and Tamora are dead, the latter having consumed her two sons baked in a meat pie, a more humane solution is sought. Lucius' father, who had appeared with Goths in his army to fight against Saturninus, is given the throne. But he has learned from what has happened that perhaps mankind should choose a different course, based on pity and compassion. The announcement is made that Tamora will not be buried, but both Shakespeare's and the film's last word is pity, even though the context is cruel:

Her life was beastly and devoid of pity.
And being dead, let birds on her take pity.

If there is an overriding theme that embodies Theodorakopoulos' choices of films, complete with their "messages,"

it is this loathing of violence and the embrace of humanity towards one's fellow man, along with the hope for a better future. For this I applaud her. Her hopeful ending (in the conclusion to her chapter on Titus) recapitulates several of the films here selected:

We have observed already a pattern of endings in Roman films that involves the protagonists turning their backs, physically or metaphorically, on Rome and its depravity. I would argue that in *Titus*, too, it seems that the future must belong to those who leave Rome behind. Varinia and her baby leave behind Rome and the crucified Spartacus; Livius and Lucilla walk away from the corrupt senators in the forum, Judah Ben-Hur retreats from Rome into domesticity and perhaps Christianity; Maximus finds refuge in Elysium; even Encolpio wanders away from the vile cannibalistic Roman nobles. So Lucius carries the baby Aaron away from the stricken Romans in their cruel arena towards a better future (167).

I have to confess that at the end when young Lucius takes Aaron's baby and walks away, I was half expecting Lucius to drown it in the ocean, remembering how he began the film with his toy soldiers that came to life, and how he cheered on the vengeance. I was glad to read the commentary, and learn from Taymor how wrong I was. So many works celebrating gladiators and books devoted to films based on wars (e.g., *Troy*) condemn the violence while at the same time seeming to wallow in it. I shouldn't have suspected Taymor of the same: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*.

Vengeance, power, greed and corruption. Familiar? Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it—or make another movie.

NOTES

1. Marianne McDonald, *Euripides in Cinema: The Heart Made Visible* (Philadelphia 1983), and a few of those on Rome are Monica Silveira Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome* (Oxford 2001); *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr., eds. (Baltimore and London 2001, 2005); David Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire: Ben-Hur and Other Toga Plays and*

Films: A Critical Anthology (Oxford 1994); Gary A. Smith, *Epic Films: Casts, Credits and Commentary on Over 250 Historical Spectacle Movies* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London 1991); and Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York and London 1997).

2. Four-disc Collector's 2005 Edition of William Wyler's presentation of *Ben-Hur*, which includes Fred Niblo's 1925 silent version of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ*; both by MGM.

3. In the interview on the last disc in the Collector's Edition just cited, it was said that Heston took six weeks to learn how to drive the chariot with these four horses (and over a year to make the movie). But at the end of the six weeks, he said that his lessons did not include other horses and chariots, and when they were added there might be a problem. He was told, "Just don't fall out of the chariot, then you have nothing to worry about. You're going to win the race." The famous stuntman Yakima Canutt directed his son Joe Canutt who executed the moment when Ben-Hur's chariot threw him out, and then Ben-Hur was seen remounting in it, as if he had never left it. The son was not supposed to flip out, but it was so spectacular they kept it in the final cut.

4. Gary A. Smith, *Epic Films: Casts, Credits and Commentary on over 250 Historical Spectacle Movies* (London 1991), 215.

5. I wrote my Master's Dissertation at the University of Chicago (1960) on "The Position of the Verb in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*," to show the transition in the speech of the slaves from inflected endings to the position in the sentence to indicate meaning. I had specialized in silver age Latin at Bryn Mawr where I studied with Berthe Marti. My dissertation was a dry linguistic study that led to my founding the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* at the University of California, Irvine, to facilitate word searches through the computerization of the texts, where my doctoral dissertation was on Greek tragedy, another linguistic study under the direction of Bruno Snell, *Terms for Happiness in Euripides. Hypomnemata*, Vol. 54 (Göttingen 1978); published Greek translation by Errikos Belies (Athens 1991).

6. Elsie Walker, "'Now is a Time to Storm': Julie Taymor's *Titus* (2000)," *Literature and Film Quarterly* 30.3 (2002), 197.

7. See my "From Titans to Titania: Classical Sources for Shakespeare," Commemorative Volume in Honor of M. Gigante, *Studi Italiani di filologia classica* (Florence 2002), 244-55.